

Making Jam in the Woods

My Relaxing Life Starts
in Another World



1

Author: **Kosuzu Kobato**

Artist: **Yuichi Murakami**





Author: **Kosuzu Kobato**
Artist: **Yuichi Murakami**

Table of Contents

Copyright

Character Page

Prologue: A Sudden Start

Chapter 1: Heaven but not Heaven

Interlude: Daniel Reynolds

Interlude: Mark Disraeli

Chapter 2: A Visitor from the Capital

Interlude: Walter Dustin

Chapter 3: Various Thoughts

Interlude: Hugh Tausend

Chapter 4: Jam, Cake, and the Daughter of the Marquis

Epilogue: Under Miselle's Sky

Afterword

Other Series

Making Jam in the Woods: My Relaxing Life Starts in Another World Vol.1
Kosuzu Kobato

Translation by Jade Willis

Illustration by Yuichi Murakami

Title Design by Arbash Mughal

Editing by Elizabeth Simins

Proofreading by A.M. Perrone and Charis Messier

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

MORI NO HOTORI DE JAM WO NIRU Vol.1 ~ ISEKAI DE HAJIMERU
SLOW LIFE ~

©Kosuzu Kobato, Yuichi Murakami 2018

First published in Japan in 2018 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION,
Tokyo.

English translation ©2023 Cross Infinite World

All rights reserved. In accordance with U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, email the publisher, addressed "Attention: Permissions Coordinator," at the email below.

Cross Infinite World

contact@crossinfworld.com

www.crossinfworld.com

Published in the United States of America

Visit us at www.crossinfworld.com

Facebook.com/crossinfworld

Twitter.com/crossinfworld

crossinfinitemworld.tumblr.com

Digital Edition ISBN: 979-8-88560-082-8

Print Edition ISBN: 979-8-88560-085-9



Daniel Reynolds

The only doctor in the village of Missele. He's a very talented man who used to be the Royal Palace's head physician.

"Welcome, you two.
You're early."

"You always
feed us well."

Mark Disraeli

Dr. Daniel's assistant.
The illegitimate son of a count,
he left his rocky family home
to become Daniel's pupil.

"Hey there, ladies.
This looks delicious."

Adelaide Dustin

A count's widow. She has
a mansion near a forest and
saved Margaret there.
She's a kind old lady.

Margaret

A woman in her late twenties who worked as a
make-up salesperson at a department store in
Japan. She was summoned to a small village
in another world as a Spirit Caller. She was
used to living with her grandmother in Hokkaido,
so she has no issue with countryside life.

Walter Dustin

Adelaide's only son. Divorced.
Inherited the title of count
from his father and works as
the prime minister's assistant
in the Royal Capital.

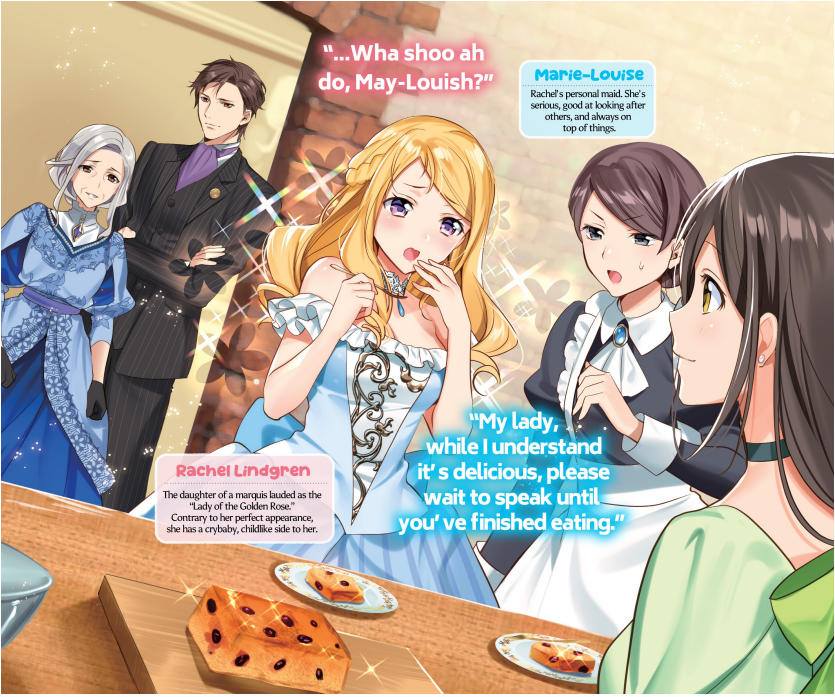
Hugh Tausend

Works for the Magic Academy,
though he's from Missele.
He's got a frivolous personality,
but is a talented magic user
with a special eye for magic.

"We're baaack.
Oh wow, that
looks delicious!"

**Making Jam
in the Woods**

My Relaxing Life Starts
in Another World



"...Wha shoo ah
do, May-Louish?"

Marie-Louise

Rachel's personal maid. She's
serious, good at looking after
others, and always on
top of things.

Rachel Lindgren

The daughter of a marquis lauded as the
"Lady of the Golden Rose."
Contrary to her perfect appearance,
she has a crybaby, childlike side to her.

"My lady,
while I understand
it's delicious, please
wait to speak until
you've finished eating."

Prologue: A Sudden Start

DAMN it, Kudo. You're gonna pay for this. I want my vacation days back...

I cursed internally as I took a sip of mineral water—which by this point had already turned lukewarm.

The time was now half past five. I had been working the second shift, without any breaks, since ten in the morning. There weren't many people in the department store break room. The cafeteria counter was closed, with only the self-service water still available. I had finally managed to squeeze in a quick break. My junior coworker, Yuuko, let out a sigh as she lay collapsed on the table opposite me.

"Aah, my foundation is coming off," she complained. "I can't believe I was standing there selling stuff looking like this... What a disgrace."

I glanced over at my junior, who was fixing up her makeup. I caught a glance at myself in her mirror and realized that I looked just as exhausted. I was so hungry that I had lost my appetite, and I only had ten more minutes to spare before I had to return to the sales floor to relieve the workers who had come in for the early shift.

I'm so unlucky. I was supposed to be off today.

It had been eight years since I'd started working as a makeup consultant for a cosmetics brand. I had just worked for eleven days in a row, so I'd been dearly looking forward to this break. I had planned to sleep a ton, and get caught up on housework... I even had an appointment booked at the hair salon, and I had bought a selection of small strawberries at the grocery store just before it had closed the night before, thinking I'd spend a relaxing day making jam.

However...

I had been woken up by a call from one of the salespeople at seven in the morning.

"S-Sorry for calling on your day off," he had said. "I hate to

ask, but I wonder if you could cover for one of the stores today?"

"...Kudo-san?" I'd replied. "What are you talking about? It's so early." The roughness of my early-morning voice definitely packed a punch. I could have sworn I heard the younger sales guy, who was already timid to begin with, let out a small yelp. *If you're gonna wake me up, you should at least be cool about it.*

"S-Sakashita-kun is in the hospital with stomach problems. There's no one else I can ask. Please, it's just for one day," Kudo had pleaded.

"Sakashita-chan?" I had repeated. "Did you push her too hard, Kudo-san? Poor girl. How many times have I told you to go easy on her? She's the type to bottle everything up."

"There really shouldn't have been an issue regarding shifts, though," he had said. "She's just so frail."

"All right, but I really can't do it today," I had said. "You do know that this is my long-awaited vacation after eleven straight days of work, right?"

"I know, and we'll figure something out to make up for it!"

I had ended up relenting and agreeing to do it. We were already struggling to stay fully staffed, so I knew all too well how hard it would be if a shift was low on people. I had worked at that particular store for around two years, so I already knew how everything worked, and I knew my junior employee there pretty well too, so it shouldn't have been too bad...but I was tired. Very tired.

And as it had turned out, we'd had way too many customers come in. It wasn't even the beginning of a special campaign or anything, but the line had seemed to go on forever.

"It was so packed today...if you hadn't come in to help out, I can't imagine how many complaints we would have gotten," Yuuko said. "Especially from *that* customer. If it had just been me who had to deal with her, I would really have let her have it."

"Oh yeah, was there some trouble with her before or something?" I asked. "I didn't really have an issue. She just seemed like a perfectly normal, cute old lady."

"Of course you'd say that!" Yuuko said. "One time, I took a little longer than usual when giving her change, and she got so mad at me. She ended up complaining about the whole department store, and the floor manager was called over. It was awful."

"Really?" I asked. "Now that you mention it, I heard she

taught etiquette at some prep school, so she's probably really strict about time and stuff like that."

"But to go that far over a few extra seconds? Long live the Elderly Whisperer..."

"Huh?"

"I mean, you always deal with a lot of older customers, right?" Yuuko explained. "You even get a lot of repeat customers specifically asking for you."

Well, that was true. There were even people who went out of their way and started visiting the store I had been relocated to. However, that was only because...

"...I was close to my grandmother," I said, "and I'm surrounded by old folks where I live, so I guess I'm just used to dealing with them."

My parents had worked a lot, and I had been born—unexpectedly—eight years after my brother, so I had ended up being raised by my grandmother. She'd been involved in my day-to-day life, had come to every Parents' Day at school, and had participated in other school events, too. My grandmother had loved doing housework, and she'd been fond of working with her hands. She would use a broom and feather duster for chores, and she'd make *ohagi*—a type of sweet rice ball coated in red bean paste or sesame seeds—during important Buddhist holidays.

I had always been stuck to her as a child, so I had gotten very accustomed to that old-fashioned way of living. My grandmother had always watched over me fondly as I would clumsily flip the *umeboshi*—a type of pickled plum—that were sitting out in the sun. Memories like that helped me find common ground with senior customers now.

Although I'd rarely had any opportunities to interact with my parents, that didn't change the fact that I had loved them dearly. But, as one would expect, I had ended up becoming much closer to the grandmother who'd raised me and spent every day with me. Looking back, I couldn't help but feel bad about the discrepancy, but my parents had welcomed the fact that I wasn't the type of child to throw a tantrum and demand their attention when they came home from work exhausted.

My beloved grandmother had passed away, followed by both of my parents passing away in an accident. It had been decided that my brother and I would move away from our spacious, single-

family home and move into an apartment instead. All our neighbors at that apartment had been elderly people.

"She used to look after me a lot, and I guess now old people just remind me of her," I said, returning to the present day. "Hey, how about we pretend I'm your mother-in-law and you can try serving me?"

"What? No way. I could never live with my future husband's family," Yuuko-chan said. "They'd probably hate me, anyway!"

"I wonder about that. I think she'd treat you nicely, Yuuko-chan," I teased.

"I've already decided," she explained. "I'm going to get married next year, and get a new house near where my parents live!"

"Oh, do you have a boyfriend?" I asked.

I knew perfectly well that my junior, cheerful and adorable though she was, had been single for about a year, so now I was purposely poking fun at her.

"You're so mean..." she said with a groan, collapsing onto the table again. "You know I've got no chance of meeting anyone while working here."

"True enough. Single men have no real reason to visit a makeup counter," I agreed. "Hmm, but I think Kudo-san is single?"

"Gah, workplace romances are a no-go," she said. "Especially not with *him*. He's of no use to me."

"Last time he was here, he got a good dressing down from the store staff," I said as Yuuko grumbled about the closest male coworker we had. The sales floor was ruled by women, but the manufacturers, higher-ups, and people on the business side of things were mostly men. The women here may not have called many of the shots, but what power they did have, they had eked out by speaking their minds, and not wasting any time trying to curry favor with others.

Men didn't find that particularly attractive, so it was difficult to go further than being colleagues.

And besides, it was annoying working in a harem-like setting, outnumbered by the opposite sex. Any self-respecting woman would never partake in a workplace romance, especially in such an environment. Myself included, of course.

As for me, I had broken up with my long-term boyfriend around six months earlier, and I had been enjoying the single life

ever since. I had no need for useless men, neither in my professional nor private life.

Aah, that's probably why so many people are choosing not to get married these days, or at least waiting until later in life to get married.

"Anyway, Chief Sakamoto has stomach problems, huh... What would we do if she quit?" Yuuko wondered out loud. "I don't want you to try for area manager, because I want you to come back to *this* store."

"I heard she's doing better now, so it should be okay," I reassured her. "And personally, I like where I work now, so I'd be happy staying there forever. Plus, early morning rush hour on the way to the main office is awful."

I had been approached about a promotion a while ago, but I had managed to avoid it, and in the end, it seemed they had decided on someone else. When you became a manager, you were mostly manager in name only. Aside from a few extra benefits, all you really ended up getting was more responsibility and unpaid overtime. I had been trying to find a way to say no, but it was really an up-or-out situation.

I had no plans to marry, and I was in my late twenties, so I really should have been looking to make a name for myself and put down roots at this company, but I hadn't thought that far ahead yet.

Even though I knew I was being blasé, I just couldn't settle down. There were no jobs I genuinely wanted to do, and I hadn't put much thought into where I had finally ended up. I didn't have any opportunities to leave this life behind and dive into a whole new life either...

Ah, I'm only feeling so negative because I'm tired and hungry. I'll have a day off tomorrow. I let out a sigh as I glanced at my watch.

"Oh no, break is almost over," I said.

"Sadly," Yuuko added.

The two of us sighed in unison and shared a smile. We had taken our heels off and been resting our tired feet under the large table in the break room. We put them back on again before standing up. *Well, back into the fray.*



THERE were only ten minutes left before the jingle would start

playing that indicated the store was about to close. The counters were still packed with people. I left a note to say I had some spare time and was going to grab some merchandise that had been left at another post, and then I headed out, leaving the sales floor behind me.

It didn't seem like there was anyone else available to go pick up the product right around closing time, and no one seemed to be around in the dimly lit back lot either, which was hidden behind a thin door that said "Employees Only" on it.

The old department store was beginning to show signs of age. The main store floors had been repaired and restored, but behind the scenes, it was run down. I hurried along to the corner of the parking lot reserved for suppliers as I felt the building's history oozing out of the crevices in its ever-familiar concrete walls.

I arrived at a small booth that seemed to be for security managers, but there were no security guards around. In front of the booth stood a single box. I checked the mailing address and sure enough, it was for us. I filled out a receipt to confirm I had picked it up. As soon as I went to reach for the box to take it with me, a delivery truck pulled into the parking lot, then started to turn around.

It didn't make any attempt to slow down as it reversed.

Huh, why isn't it slowing down?

If you're gonna drop stuff off, shouldn't you use the back of the parking lot? There's space to turn around there, right? Is he new? Hold up, is that the driver collapsed on the steering wheel?!

I've gotta get out of here, I thought to myself, but it was too late. The truck was so close that I could feel the rush of air it displaced as it smashed into an ancient pillar, causing one of the old building's walls to collapse, before it finally came to a stop. Then, with a loud rumbling sound, I felt the concrete crumble under my feet. I watched the ceiling fall down around me as if in slow motion.

Oh no, I can't get out in time. Even though the truck didn't hit me directly, I wonder if this'll count as a car accident, I casually thought to myself—a thought that became my last in this world. I really was unlucky, getting into an accident on a day when I wasn't even supposed to be working.

This *would* count as a workplace accident, right?



...HMM? Huh, my face feels wet. My neck feels ticklish... Ugh, all right, I get it, I'll get up so you can stop licking me... Warm breath... huh, a dog?!

What's this huge, Afghan-hound-looking creature?! Th-That gave me a real fright! Huh, where am I? Am I in the sky? An Afghan hound in the sky? Ah, of course, I'm lying on the ground, and the Afghan hound is staring down at me from above.

...But how?

What...what happened to me? I can't remember... Wait. Work, yeah, I was working...that's right. I was in the back when a truck hit me... I wonder if the driver was okay.

So... Hm. Am I...in heaven?

Yeah. Okay. I'm in heaven. There are blue skies and I can feel a calm, gentle breeze... I wonder if my grandma is here. My parents, too. I bet they're all mad I'm here long before my time.

Um, sorry to my brother and my sister-in-law. I got here way before you. I'll leave what happens to the apartment to you guys. Sorry I've been such a bother as a sister.

Ah, the strawberries, what a waste. I wanted to make jam with those strawberries... Wait, why is that my priority right now, considering my current circumstances?

It was odd that that was all I thought about, if I did say so myself. I thought I had gotten quite attached to my life. But I guess by dying, I was letting go of all of it.

The damp ground I was lying on felt real, though. The smell of the earth, as well as the feeling of the wet leaves soaking through my clothes—it was all real. It reminded me of the riverbanks I had played on as a child. Oh, yeah, so I guess heaven isn't up in the clouds after all...

Huh, where did that friendly dog go? I wanted to pet him.

Ah...I'm kinda tired.

My body feels heavy, like it's made of lead...oh well. I'll just...get some...shut...eye...

As my consciousness faded, I heard a dog bark, as well as the soft voice of a woman, who scolded the dog somewhere in the distance.

Chapter 1: Heaven but not Heaven

“OH, there you are!” a voice called out to me. “Don’t overdo it; your wounds aren’t fully healed yet.”

I was standing in a spacious, well-maintained vegetable garden, carrying a basket and busily gathering enough vegetables for two people.

A large Afghan hound named Buddy approached with his owner, Lady Adelaide. Lady Adelaide was the exemplary woman who had rescued me, a gravely injured stranger, and nursed me back to health. She had even provided me with food and shelter.

Oh, and I hadn’t died, after all. Rather, I had come to a different world.



BACK on the day of my rescue, I had just lost consciousness again as I gazed up at the sky.

The next thing I knew, I was awake, lying in a bed, and my whole body was in agony. There were two people staring at me. Neither of them was Japanese. One was an older man with graying hair, and the other was a refined older woman—who had no doubt been just as refined in her youth.

Grandma? I accidentally tried calling out to her.

She was wearing a neat dress that looked like something out of a movie or a fairy tale. Her white hair was loosely tied up. Her concerned expression reminded me of my deceased grandmother’s. But more importantly, as soon as I woke up, I felt like I was going to pass out again.

My memory of the following three days was hazy due to the pain and fever. Lady Adelaide was the one to bring me food, help me eat, keep me cool, and selflessly nurse me back to health. She was a retired countess who now served as the proprietress of a large mansion. She had a small staff of workers who would come twice a week, but she mostly did everything around the estate by herself.

And even with all that on her plate, she was still an absolute goddess who looked after me without ever seeming annoyed by it.



WHEN I woke up again, the first thing I laid eyes on was a ceiling with ornate crown molding. In place of overhead lighting, there were wall sconces with clear glass shades, which were surrounded by wallpaper with a large floral print. Between the atmospheric lights and the wind flowing in through the wooden shutters on the window, it felt like I had woken up in a bedroom straight out of a children's book.

I gently raised one of my arms. It was completely wrapped in bandages. My head and legs were also bandaged, apparently, but strangely enough, I wasn't in that much pain. I was wearing a beige floral nightgown, which I also couldn't help but think really suited the scene.

I could feel my cheek when I touched it, so my nerves were still working just fine, and I could hear the birds singing outside. It seemed like I hadn't ended up in heaven after all. When I sat up, my joints popped in a few places. I noticed I had two or three pillows, and the feeling began to creep over me that I was no longer in Japan. I was looking out at the lush green scenery from the window, when there was a light knock, followed by the dark wooden door slowly opening.

The woman I had seen before losing consciousness again entered the room. At first, she seemed surprised to see me awake, but then her expression changed to one of relief, which once again reminded me of my grandmother. Although she wasn't Japanese like my grandmother, her beauty and elegance gave the two women a very similar presence.

She placed the tray she was holding on the bedside table, sat herself down in a nearby chair, and began talking to me.

"Oh, you're awake, I'm glad... Daniel did say you were. Are you still in any pain?"

I recognized her soft voice from my dreams. *So this is the woman who's been looking after me.* I tried to thank her, and offer her some explanation, but—

"..."

...Nothing came out.

“It’s a bit late for this now, but allow me to introduce myself,” she said. “I’m Adelaide Dustin, though you can call me Adelaide. May I ask your name?”

“...”

Although she had politely asked for my name while gently holding my hand, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t get any sound to come out of my mouth. Only air. I suddenly started to panic. I was struggling to breathe.

“Have you lost your voice...?”



Lady Adelaide brought me some tea when she noticed that I was having trouble breathing. I grasped at my throat as I felt the color drain from my face, then I accepted the cup of tea, my hand shaking slightly, and took a sip.

Drip.

A teardrop splashed into the cup.

I cried for the first time then, sobbing my eyes out, although I didn't make any sound.

It had finally hit me: I was in a different world, with no way of going home. I had been the victim of an accident in my old world. I wasn't sure how I knew it, but deep down, I was certain that was the reality of it.

I continued to sob silently. In exchange for my life, I seemed to have lost my voice and had ended up here. Even though I was aware of that fact, I couldn't get my feelings under control, and I felt like I was losing my mind. I was scared.

I only came to my senses when Lady Adelaide carefully took the cup from my shaking hand and looked at me with a calm expression.

"The doctor will see you in the afternoon, and we can talk to him about this then," she said. "It's all right, he's a trustworthy person."

All I could do was nod in response. And although I ended up crying for a long time, she stayed silently next to me the whole time, gently rubbing my back. I wondered if she was aware of how much that helped me.

Looking back, that was what allowed me to turn things around.

I finally stopped crying, feeling embarrassed that I had been sobbing like that at my age, and smiled grudgingly. Lady Adelaide seemed relieved and left to get me a fresh cup of hot tea.

I vowed to myself that this time, I'd drink the tea before it got cold. I felt like I could see more clearly.



ONCE I had finally calmed down, I was instructed to rest until the doctor came, so I laid back down in bed. I took the towel that I had been using to reduce the swelling around my eyes from all my

crying from my face, and as I opened my eyes, I noticed the large dog that I had seen before.

Even though I had never had the chance to own a pet myself, I loved animals. I felt myself smile as the dog approached me, wagging his tail happily. I wasn't afraid of him, even as he came close enough to get a good look at my face.

It looked like he wanted attention, so I reached my arm out and stroked him on the head as I lowered myself back into bed. He closed his eyes, seemingly enjoying it. As I scratched his neck and behind his ears, he made a cute sound and nudged me with his head. *How adorable!*

From what I knew about dog breeds, he seemed like an Afghan hound. His dark brown, coffee-colored eyes seemed like they wanted to say something as he stared at me.

You're the one who found me.

I moved my lips to speak, but no sound came out. But this time, instead of crying about it, I smiled. And even though I couldn't speak, I couldn't help but keep trying.

I guess I won't lose my habit of talking to myself anytime soon after living alone for so long.

The dog moving closer to me and letting me look after him put me in a good mood, so I lifted myself up again and started petting him properly, and that was when a little face popped out of his long silver fur, followed by an equally small body. It was about the size of my palm and had transparent wings attached to its back. Its eyes, which were brimming with excitement, met mine. And then, before I could react, there was the sound of wings flapping as more of them appeared.

Are they...wait, are they fairies? Am I in some sort of fantasy world?! I was confused, but I gently put out my hand, and a couple of the small figures landed on it. I gave one of them a poke, and it twisted its body away as if it had been tickled. I tickled it again with the tip of my finger, and it narrowed its eyes, seeming to be enjoying it. *Adorable!*

More of them continued to appear, and as I was playing with them, there was a knock at the door.

"I'm coming in. How are you fee—"

Lady Adelaide was followed in by the gray-haired old man I already recognized. There was also one more person, a tall young man. *He looks like an actor in a foreign film...*

All three of them were looking at me with shocked expressions. As I wondered to myself why, the small beings that had been warming up to me flew hurriedly out of the window with a flutter of their wings. *Aw, they were so cute.*

“Nice to meet you,” the older man said as he regained his composure. “Ah yes, I can see you’re looking better already.”

He was dressed in white and he reintroduced himself as Dr. Daniel Reynolds. The handsome blond guy was his pupil and assistant, Mark Disraeli. They were the only doctors in the village of Miselle, and they had been treating me.

“We heard about your voice from Addie. But before we get into that, let me have a look at your wounds,” Dr. Daniel said.

After confirming that I could understand him, he skillfully removed my bandages and began a brief medical examination. Dr. Daniel had a serious stare, and combined with his movements and his orders for Mark, it gave off the impression that he was a very skilled doctor.

He checked my arms and my head, and then I swung my legs over the side of the bed so he could examine them. Sitting like that was fine, but when I tried to stand up, excruciating pain shot down my left leg. I screamed—though it made no sound—and collapsed back into bed, tears streaming down my face. Then the doctor placed his hand on my bandaged leg, and somehow the pain receded. He might as well have said “Pain, pain, go away,” and had it actually work. I stared at my leg in shock.

“Make sure not to overdo it,” he said. “Healing magic isn’t very effective.”

Huh, magic? Did he just say “magic?”

Just as I’d thought, this world was a lot different from the one I’d come from.



AND I was in for another shock. According to the people who had rescued me, I was apparently a “Spirit Caller” who had been summoned to this world by Spirits. Spirits that rarely ever appeared on this continent. I was their Caller. It wasn’t taboo, nor was it a secret. There were even past records of such a thing.

Those who were known as Spirit Callers had two traits: the

first was that they had no magical ability themselves. The second was that they were able to see and interact with Spirits and fairies. So I wasn't in the wrong for automatically thinking, *This whole situation is like something out of a fantasy!*

"Magic" was perfectly common here. Humans and animals all had magical powers; if you didn't, it was like being dead.

Whoa, so I'm basically a zombie by their standards.

I had been in bad shape when they'd found me in Lady Adelaide's back garden, though looking at myself now, I could hardly believe it. I had no visibly bad injuries, and although I still couldn't stand on my left leg, I was in almost no pain. I'd been ready to die when I showed up in this world, so I must have really been in a bad way, but I had recovered to the point of being able to move around in only a few days. *Magic is amazing.*

Apparently, Dr. Daniel realized I had no magical ability as he tended to my wounds. The way I had appeared, as well as my strange clothes and what I looked like had given him the idea. It had been the small, winged people from before that had confirmed it for him.

I was the only one who could see them. To everyone else, they appeared as small grains of golden light. These little lights that looked a bit like fireflies were known as "Fairy Lights" in this country. They usually lived deep within forests and hid away whenever they came into contact with humans. Ever actually seeing them was very rare. But they had come right over to me.

"It's probably overwhelming telling you this all of a sudden," Dr. Daniel said as he pulled a book with a wonderful cover out of his bag. "In this book, you'll find everything we know about Spirit Callers so far. I borrowed it especially from the Royal Library. The information itself is what I've talked about with you already, so it shouldn't be too difficult, but are you able to read the words?"

Judging from his mention of a "Royal Library," I figured that this country must have been run by a monarchy. I flicked through the book and saw words made up of characters I didn't recognize. But for some reason, I was able to read them anyway. And strangely, when I was passed a pen and paper, I was able to write the characters as well. I still didn't have a lot of strength, so it ended up looking like it had been written by a child who had only just learned their letters. But it was still a relief to learn I would be able to communicate by writing.

"I'll continue to make daily visits," Dr. Daniel advised. "You should slowly make your way through that book with Addie."

They asked me to tell them my name. However, when they looked at the paper where I had written it, both the doctor and Lady Adelaide looked confused. It seemed they couldn't read my name.

"Hmm...I'm pretty good with other alphabets, but I can't read this. How about you, Mark?"

"I can't read it either," Mark said.

Oh man, he's judging me. The assistant, Mark, had seen to me without issue, and he'd been careful when wrapping my bandages and otherwise treating me. However, he was—how do I put it—really cool...no, haughty? He was ridiculously good-looking, which certainly helped build that image, and I could understand somewhat why he would find it foolish to trust someone who had just randomly appeared out of the sky, and hence why he was acting a little standoffish.

In a way, it was actually stranger that Lady Adelaide had been so concerned for me. She had listened with great concern to the doctor's opinion on both my voice and health status.

My voice... I still hadn't worked out what was going on with that. All I knew was that the doctor had seen to me, and he couldn't find anything wrong.

"Spirit Callers are—that's right, according to this, there are lots of cases of them losing their memories. But in your case, you might have lost your voice instead," the doctor said, flipping through the book's pages.

Lady Adelaide seemed like she didn't agree with that conclusion, but it made sense to me.

If I had lost anything else, it was my eyes. Most Japanese people have dark brown eyes, but now one of my eyes was a light brown—almost golden. After crying earlier, Lady Adelaide had fixed my hair, and when I had looked at myself in the mirror she'd handed me after, I had almost screamed—except no noise would have come out anyway. At that moment, I didn't know why my eye color had changed or if there even was a reason for it.

Unfortunately, my eyesight was still bad, and I didn't have my glasses or contact lenses, so it was a little hard to see. But it wasn't so bad that I couldn't go about my day-to-day life. I could see faces if they were up close, and recently I had been suffering from a bout

of dry eyes, so I'd only been wearing my glasses on the commute to work. I hadn't even worn contacts when I was on the sales floor, so everything was a little blurry, but as long as I wasn't watching TV or driving my car, it was mostly fine.

Anyway, even though I had written my name using the language of this world, it seemed nobody could read it, so I asked for a name from this world.

"Hmm...how about Margaret?" Lady Adelaide suggested, as she looked at my ears, explaining that the name meant "pearl."

I had arrived in this world mostly empty-handed, with only my destroyed clothes, one shoe, and a broken wristwatch. But I still had my pearl earrings, which were in a teardrop shape, similar to the ones in the famous painting, though mine were made of small Keshi pearls. The clasp was designed in such a way that it wouldn't fall out even if something were to catch on it.

We weren't allowed to wear accessories while at work, but these pearls had been passed down from my grandmother to my mother to me, so I had secretly worn them at work in place of an *omamori*, as a kind of lucky charm. My hair hid the earrings well, and even when someone realized I was wearing them, they let it go because they weren't particularly sparkly and were subtler than diamonds or anything like that.

Lady Adelaide had made my name a small reminder of my past life.

"Ah, that's a wonderful name," Dr. Daniel said with a smile. I felt like I was about to cry again, so I distracted myself by petting Buddy.



AS promised, the doctor came to visit me every day. I felt my wounds warm up as he poured healing magic into them. Some of my scars had faded over time, and now they were hardly visible. Even with my broken arm, while my finger movements were still slow, I hardly felt any pain.

I couldn't say it was completely healed, but my left leg and foot—which had been damaged the most—were healed enough that I could stand. Apparently, this was nothing short of a miracle. Mark had let it slip that even the doctor had been certain my leg wouldn't

heal, so that made it even more amazing that it actually had.

Magic is amazing. How come I can't use it, though? I would have preferred to be able to use it.

At first, the doctor made his house calls while I lay in the bed in the guest room, but once I was able to move around more, they let me meet him in the kitchen, on the veranda, or just wherever I happened to be at that moment.

The veranda that connected the living room and the garden was my favorite spot. The wide wooden deck had a roof, a table, a bench, and a rocking chair. When my leg hurt, or when I wasn't feeling too well, I found that being outside helped a lot, but daydreaming in the rocking chair was the best.

In it, I had an unobstructed view of Lady Adelaide's fields, and the forest that was behind it, silhouetted against the wide blue sky. Whenever I gazed at the view from the rocking chair, I felt my mind and body relax.

I especially loved rainy days. Here in Miselle, the rain was gentle. The soft raindrops made a pleasant sound, so it felt like I was surrounded by a soft curtain. When I inhaled deeply, breathing in the mixture of rain and forest smells, I felt it travel all the way to my fingertips—which was peculiar. The days were still chilly, and out of worry that I would catch a cold, I'd wrap myself up in a blanket. The doctor and Mark would smile wryly when they saw me all bundled up on the veranda, but of course, they didn't try to stop me.



IN the spare moments between treatments, the doctor and Lady Adelaide would ask me questions—while being mindful of my condition—and I would answer them. I had come here with absolutely nothing, and I had nothing to hide from these kind people, so I did my best to answer everything I could.

The first thing I learned about was the Spirits. Spirits were actually very important in this world. They played an integral part in making sure it was stable, and Spirit Callers seemed to assist them in doing so. If the Spirits were looked after well, they would bring good fortune, whereas if they became angry, they could bring about disasters that would drive the world to ruin. For that reason,

Spirit Callers tended to be just as well-respected as the Spirits.

I was really perplexed when I found that out. After all, I was just a former sales assistant in her late twenties. I wasn't really someone who could ever have anywhere near that much influence on a whole world, or a country. I must have looked concerned thinking about it, because Dr. Daniel patted me on the head like a child.

"You don't need to worry, Margaret," he said. "Just think of this country as a place where Spirits and Spirit Callers live in harmony."

"Also, it's said that Spirit Callers these days rarely have to do anything anyway, and they just live their lives in peace," Lady Adelaide added, opening up the book we had borrowed.

Since I had worked in a customer-facing job, I was very accustomed to meeting and speaking with new people. But that didn't mean I wanted to mingle with bigshots or be revered like some kind of shrine maiden. I knew absolutely nothing about this world.

"Don't worry, we'll let them know your wishes," Lady Adelaide reassured me. Due to the nature of Spirit Callers, it only made sense that they needed to report to the Royal Palace. Dr. Daniel had volunteered to report in for me—it seemed that, before opening a practice here, he had worked in the Royal Palace. As a result, he still had a lot of contacts there. He wasn't just some old countryside doctor.

He was quite old, though, with wrinkles around his eyes when he smiled. He also seemed to have known Lady Adelaide since a long time ago, and had decided to work in Miselle because of her.

It seemed the government often put the wishes of the Spirit Callers first. If war were to break out or if there were internal conflict then it would be different, but the king of this country seemed like a stand-up person. For that, I was grateful. And if I wanted to work in the palace or the temple, they'd said they would be happy to take me on.

Lady Adelaide looked at me with a kind look, like my grandmother would, and softly let me know that I could stay with her until I was fully healed, and then she would put my wishes first. There was really no end to her kindness.

After giving me some time to think, Lady Adelaide asked what I would like to do. I wrote down that I wanted to repay her for all

she had done for me, and that if it wasn't any bother, she could let me stay here as a maid. I didn't even need to think about it. I was enamored with Lady Adelaide, not least of all because of how much she reminded me of my grandmother.

We were in the countryside, and Lady Adelaide's mansion was a little old-fashioned, but it suited me. I couldn't imagine what the Royal Palace and the city were like, nor what people's lives were like there.

Since waking up, I had gotten quickly accustomed to this way of life. It felt like something that had been lost in the midst of my busy life before had returned.

I was more than used to cleaning without modern appliances; I had done the same when I'd lived with my grandmother. And once my wounds had fully healed, I would be able to help with fieldwork. If they let me work here to earn my keep, it would really help me, as well as let me pay back my treatment costs.

On the other hand, we were talking about this roughly one month after I had arrived, long enough for me to understand that Lady Adelaide truly lived alone. The only guests she had were Dr. Daniel and Mark, who came for my check-ups. It didn't seem like any relatives or family visited.

Her husband had passed away a long time ago, and I heard she had a son living in the capital. Naturally, there were no phones, but it seemed like he never sent any letters, either, despite living so far away. I had sometimes seen Lady Adelaide gaze wistfully at the pictures of her family lined up on top of the hearth.

She lived alone in this mansion, with Buddy as her only companion.

But, if she was happy that way, then my request might be asking too much. So I wrote that down, too. *"I'm so fond of you, so I want to stay with you. But, I don't want to cause you any trouble."* In reality, I would still be another mouth to feed.

Dr. Daniel was supportive of my idea, saying he had been worried about Lady Adelaide being on her own for a while now.

"I've recommended she hire an attendant or a maid before, but she's always declined," he explained. "I mean, I do understand that at our age, you need to be careful about living with someone you don't know. But this mansion is separated from the village. If something were to happen, it would be a while before anyone would even notice."

Buddy, who had found me passed out in the back garden first, had run all the way to the clinic and brought the doctor and his assistant back with him. Dr. Daniel looked horrified when he recalled the moment; he had thought something had happened to Lady Adelaide.

"Addie is quite relaxed around you, so I think you'd be a great fit. If you stayed with her, I'd be most grateful," he continued.

"I'm fond of you, too, so I'd love for you to stay here," Lady Adelaide said. "Of course, you can!" With Dr. Daniel urging her on, Lady Adelaide happily accepted my proposal; it was almost like I had asked her to marry me, and she'd said yes. "But, I won't take you on as a maid. If anything, I just want you to live here with me."

I nodded repeatedly as she stroked my hair with her slender fingers.

"And, if you ever want to leave, you're free to do so anytime. The Royal Capital is probably a lot better than living with me, for a young woman..."

I responded with, "*I'll only leave when you want me to,*" and Lady Adelaide laughed so hard she had tears in her eyes.

"In that case, you'll be here until I'm dead!"

We both laughed, knowing that was a long time away.



STRAAAAWBEEEEERRIES! *Strawberrieeeee! Woohoo, strawberries! ...Ahem.*

But seriously, Lady Adelaide's fields were the *best*. Not only did they have vegetables, but they had strawberries, too, and there were blueberry bushes across the way. As someone who had gone blueberry and strawberry picking every year without fail in the past, I was really excited. I had even heard that there were other berries in the forest behind the back garden, depending on the time of year. I couldn't wait for the seasons to change.

For now, though, it's strawberries. I gathered some yesterday. I'll gather some today, too. I'll gather the ones that are ripe, and eat them like that, or make them into sweets. Ahh, how luxurious! So delicious! There are a lot of ripe ones today, so maybe I can make jam with them.

It did depend on how many of the strawberries I could use for jam, though.

You could have called me a professional, the way I was gathering the strawberries with ease, my face glowing with joy.

Aah, here I am with my wooden basket, a gingham checkered cloth inside. I'm in my element. I felt like I was in the world of Anne of Green Gables.

Buddy was waiting for me at the entrance to the field, wagging his tail. I gave him a pat and we headed back together. I sang a song, silently of course, while I enjoyed the beautiful day. The early morning sunlight was shining through the trees, and a fresh spring wind was blowing. The birds were chirping pleasantly.

The forest behind the back garden was the count's private property, so there were rarely any villagers there, which meant I could act as weird as I liked... It was the best. I spun around, dancing along to the waltz in my head. *Ouch, okay, my ankle still hurts.*

It had been around two months since I had arrived. My injuries were nearly all healed, with the exception of my left leg and foot. But even then, if I didn't run or fool around like I had just done, it didn't cause me too much trouble.

It seemed this world also had the four seasons. I was relieved when I heard that the summer wasn't that hot. Summers in Tokyo were so humid! I was born in Hokkaido, and I never could get used to Tokyo summers, so I'd always lose a lot of weight in the summer.

There were also tons of fruits and vegetables and other similar things to what I was used to, though they might have been slightly different. In my past life, a lot of produce was selectively bred, but in this world, it seemed to be closer to the original strain, so the fruits were a bit smaller. Their colors, shapes, and seasons were also a tiny bit different. I was used to vegetables that had been cultivated in a greenhouse, so maybe I hadn't been aware of the seasons because of that. And the flavors were similar...but if I'm being totally honest, they were way more delicious here. The flavors were deep and rich.

The fresh vegetables were so good that I could give them a quick wash, cut them up, sprinkle on some salt or oil, and eat them just like that and it was delicious. And when I used them to make a soup, I didn't need to add a bouillon cube or fond de veau. If I just threw in a few aromatics, like garlic, shallots, or even bacon, it ended up tasting just like a Provencal-style soup!

To be honest, I don't really know what Provencal style is, but that's

what it feels like. It's delicious. I love rice, but I love bread too. It's not like I'm so fussy that I won't eat anything that isn't Japanese food! I'm just a glutton. I'll eat anything as long as it's tasty.

I felt like I was leading a healthy lifestyle for the first time in my life, now that I had easy access to a wide variety of fresh vegetables, with good quality meat and dairy products readily available next door.

I mean, my skin is so soft and smooth, and I've even lost a little weight, though that could be due to all the moving around I'm doing as I clean up. As someone who used to work in cosmetics, I was deeply impressed by how good the produce here was for my skin. In fact, I actually ended up making my own simple skin lotion using some of the local vegetables.

But your eating and sleeping and other habits can also have a big impact. Like waking up early, eating a balanced diet, not overeating, exercising regularly, and being around clean air and water.

Of course I had known all of that before, but I had been so busy in my past life that I'd never been able to do any of it. Now, it was just my daily life. I wondered if Sakashita-chan's stomach problems had gotten any better. *She needs to follow a stress-free life! I'm aware that's impossible, though!*

Sometimes, I would still feel a twinge in my chest when I thought about the past. But strangely enough, I never once thought that I hated it here, or that I wanted to go back. I did sometimes feel uneasy, but it was still better than what I'd had before. *I'm here after all, so I might as well enjoy it.*



“OH, you're back. Oh dear, that's a lot!” Lady Adelaide exclaimed as she peeked into my basket, which was full of strawberries. “Now you can finally make jam,” she added with a cute wink. Even Buddy's tail was wagging excitedly. Ever since I had started picking strawberries, I'd been saying I would make jam.

I gave the strawberries a rinse in the front garden sink by the kitchen, removing all the soil and whatever else. I had never washed the strawberries I'd bought at the supermarket; I had been told by a girl who worked in a patisserie not to do so. She had said that if they had been grown outside, I should wash off any visible

dirt or grass, but most strawberries were cleaned before being sold, so it was fine to use them as they were—and besides, the minerals in the water weren't good for the strawberries. The strawberries could be sterilized by boiling them, and it was easy to remove any scum that floated to the surface.

Once the strawberries were clean, I gently wrapped them in cloth to absorb the excess water, then I peeled off the damaged parts with a small fruit knife, and cut the bigger ones into halves or quarters before putting them all into a bowl. Next, I weighed the strawberries, not including the bowl.

For sugar, I would use granulated sugar or baker's sugar in the past. Granulated sugar gives the jam a refreshing taste and color, whereas baker's sugar adds a lot of depth to the sweetness. I had often used baker's sugar when it had been featured in special sales at the supermarket.

The amount of sugar needed was based on the number of strawberries, so I usually divided the weight of the strawberries by two and then put that much sugar in. *I feel like this can vary from person to person, though.*

Jam was originally a way of preserving foods, so sugar was a must. In fact, I had once made jam using only a third of the weight of the strawberries in sugar. It had been good for being able to taste the fruit more directly, but it hadn't kept for very long, even in the fridge, and it wasn't that sweet, so I'd ended up using it all up at once rather than storing it. I went back to the original recipe the next season.

If you're worried about calories, then I'd just be mindful of how much jam you use. I personally prefer to have sweet things in small doses anyway. You can put it in tea in place of sugar, and it goes well with yogurt. Yeah, it's pretty nice.

So that was why the sugar always had to be half the weight of the strawberries. It was an ironclad rule for me.

I then put the strawberries and sugar together in a bowl, covered the bowl, and left it alone to set. *On cool days you don't have to worry about it spoiling, so it's okay to leave it out overnight.* Once the sugar had soaked up the water from the strawberries, the mixture was ready to be boiled. *If you're using an enamel or stainless-steel pan, you can put the sugar and strawberries in right away, let the mixture melt, and then cook it that way.*

"Put the jam in this," Lady Adelaide said as she took out a

copper pan, its subdued but polished finish gleaming. I had always wanted a copper pan. And I still didn't know what kinds of metals were available in this world, but to me, this was a copper pan. It made me grin. This was too wonderful, making jam with the strawberries I had harvested from the garden in a copper pan.

I'm living such a glamorous, relaxed life. I had never been interested in this sort of thing when I'd seen it in magazines and so on. It had never felt real. The fields and houses had all looked like they only existed for show, and it may be rude to say it, but it just reeked of lies.

Real farm life was dirty and made it hard to keep on top of relationships. Real farmers were incredibly busy and didn't have a lot of spare time, so their houses were filled with utilitarian plastic tools. They didn't have sneakers in their entryways; they had boots coated in mud. They favored cleaning products that could get dirt out rather than prioritizing eco-friendliness—or at least that was my impression of the reality of farm life.

Well, it's a wide world out there, so there probably are people somewhere leading a stylishly relaxing farm life.

It seemed farming and crafting things by hand weren't popular in this world either. Lady Adelaide often said she was behind the times or expressed regret that she didn't have any handy magical devices around.

Hmm... If I were to talk about Lady Adelaide's house in Japan terms, it seemed like it was stuck in the early years of the *Showa* period, so it was pretty old-fashioned. She didn't have a rice cooker or a water boiler. You had to get your water manually, from a pump, and while there was electricity, they only used lamps. The toilet had a septic tank, and most cleaning was done with a broom and a dust cloth. It seemed the young ladies in the village weren't very...fond of this way of life.

But I don't mind. Absolutely zero problems for me.

I had never really used a rice cooker to begin with. My brother had given me a small hand-me-down one, but I'd never been able to make rice well with it. Good rice cookers were designed for families and were surprisingly expensive. I wouldn't be able to cook for myself every day anyway, so I used to make rice in a pot on the stove.

Rice is delicious that way. If you take out the time it takes to clean it, you can have it ready in twenty minutes.

Since I was so close to my grandmother, I was used to cleaning with an old brush and broom. *So, I'm good on that front.* Or rather, I had no confidence I'd be able to use a magical cleaning device, since I couldn't even use magic. It seemed devices like that were made so anyone could use them, but if anything went wrong, I wouldn't be able to handle it, so they were no good.

As a result, it didn't take me long to get accustomed to things. *After all, I'm fine with dirt and bugs... Ah, I'm not particularly cute or girly, am I? That's why I'm single, huh? I mean it's fine, but...sigh.*

I put the jam bowl to one side in the kitchen and started preparations for lunch. Lady Adelaide usually ate a really light lunch, like a German cold dinner. She had cheese or fruit on small slices of bread, along with something to drink. There were times when she didn't even have bread.

At first after I had arrived, she'd prepared actual lunches to be mindful of what I was used to, but once I'd found out that she didn't typically have lunches like that, she went back to her usual habits. Doing extra work like that would go against the benefits of the whole living together thing if it interrupted her routine. I didn't think lunch was that important anyway, and besides, I had way more things I wanted or needed to do during the day.

So, I prepared tea alongside our simple lunch, and grabbed a bell that was in the kitchen. It was like something out of a movie, when the master of a house uses a bell to call his butler. It was small, gold, and decorated with a lily of the valley pattern. Even if I just put it down somewhere, it looked like it could easily have been part of the decor. Lady Adelaide had given it to me so I could call for people when needed, because I couldn't speak. She had told me I could take it with me wherever I went, but I usually just kept it in the kitchen.

Yes, I was mostly always in the kitchen anyway.

I rang the bell and it gave off a soft *ding-a-ling* sound. Lady Adelaide called out in response, then came in with Buddy, and we smiled as we both clapped our hands together as if to say, "Let's eat!"



ONCE I had finished clearing up after lunch, I quickly did some

weeding by the entryway before checking on the bowl of strawberries. The sugar was perfectly gooey. As I thought, ripe strawberries were perfect for this.

It's time to boil them! It shouldn't take long. The key was to use an extremely deep pot and boil it over a high-heat flame so nothing got stuck to the bottom.

Although the mansion didn't have many magical tools in general, there were a lot in the kitchen. For example, there was this Sparkstick stove. I would say that Sparksticks were something special only magic users would ever be able to recognize or use, but...they didn't seem to be. They were basically chopsticks. Their length and feel were just like chopsticks.

As for the stove, underneath the trivet lay a donut-shaped black stone. Inside that stone was a round red stone that circled around the hole in the middle of the donut. If you spun the Sparkstick (just one) around, the fire would light. You could control the heat and turn it off using a switch at the front of the stove. I had no idea how it worked or even what fueled it, but I could at least use these kinds of magical tools. This style of stove seemed old-fashioned, too; apparently you didn't need the Sparksticks for newer versions. I didn't mind doing it though, so it worked out fine.

I continued to stir the strawberries over high heat. White bubble-shaped scum started to appear on the surface with little burbling sounds, so I did my best to scoop it out. A deep pot was good for this.

If you spend too much time scooping out the scum, it can burn at the bottom, so it's best to keep stirring all of it and raising or lowering the heat as necessary to avoid it boiling over. Well, keep the heat mostly on high. If you don't, it'll take a long time for it to boil down, and I find that the color is better if it doesn't take as long.

Ah, also, it's up to you whether you want to add lemon juice or not. If you want to keep the strawberry seeds, stir softly; if not, thoroughly mash the strawberries with a perforated spoon, making sure to keep stirring constantly to avoid burning them. Once tiny bubbles are rising to the surface and turning into bigger bubbles, and the mixture looks glossy, it's done.

Turn off the heat, then check how it's boiled down. You can do this by putting it in a small dish and allowing it to cool in order to see how soft it is, or you can put a small amount into a cold cup of water to see if it hardens. But if you want to check how it is when cold, it's best not

to do this while it's still hot, though it all depends on how thick you want your jam to be.

Finally, fill a sterilized jar almost to the top with the jam while it's still hot, then tightly fasten the lid before turning it upside down to let it cool. And, done! It's quick, right? That's the jam made already.

Like that, it should keep for around three months at room temperature, but if you want it to last longer, turn the jar or jars right-side up again and put them in a pan. Fill the pan up with water until the jars are completely covered, then apply heat. Once the water is boiling, turn the heat off and let it naturally cool down. And, how strange! The jars are now vacuum-sealed. Now, they'll keep for a long time!



While I was happily making jam, Dr. Daniel had arrived for a house call. I had been planning to give him some jam as a souvenir to take home...but it wasn't that simple. Because as he was examining me, he brought something up about that morning that should have been a secret.

Someone saw me. SOMEONE. SAW. ME! Aaah, how embarrassing!

Mark had watched me dance around while carrying the strawberries, and then had seen me crouch down and nurse my ankle after I twisted it. *Huh, is there a footpath or something in the forest near the fields?* Apparently, Mark often went out there to pick medicinal herbs in the mornings. Ugh, I'd had no idea!

Hey, Mark, you could've at least said something to me. Why did you go telling the doctor instead?

The silver-haired doctor still treated me like a child, even though I had told him I was twenty-eight. He patted my head again like he was saying, "What are we going to do with you?"

Well, I know he's not looking down on me, and I know he's not shocked or anything. He definitely means well, but it still makes me cringe! I'm not used to being treated like your daughter, or like anyone's daughter!

I had lost my parents in a car accident right after my grandmother had passed away, when I was in middle school. I did have an older brother, but we were far apart in age. He had lived in his own place and was mostly independent. *Yeah, one of those guys.* If he hadn't met my sister-in-law, he would no doubt still be single now. *Dear sister-in-law, thank you for inflicting him with love.* It had been a while since they'd gotten married, and they both seemed to still be madly in love the last time I'd seen them, so that was probably still the case. *I hope so.*

It had been tough after my parents had died. Outside of my grandmother, I hadn't been close to any of my relatives, so I'd had no one to rely on. I'd been able to get by for a while with the help of people in the neighborhood and teachers at school. It had probably been a good thing that my older brother had already been an adult by that point, because he'd graduated college the following year and returned to our hometown to work, and then things had finally settled down.

We had needed to sell our single-family home, which had been

very dear to me, and buy a snug apartment instead for a simple enough reason: snow shoveling. It took a lot of time and effort to maintain a detached house in Hokkaido. Especially in the winter. I had been attending middle school in addition to doing the housekeeping, and my brother had had to do a lot of overtime as a new employee, so while it wasn't like it was a ridiculous amount of upkeep, both of us were too busy to stay on top of it.

The road in front of our house was narrow, so the snowplows had rarely ever passed through it. I'd especially hated when it snowed heavily. We'd end up getting the neighbors to help, and using a huge shovel to move the snow. Shoveling snow until eight at night, only for it to snow again just as hard overnight, had been a daily occurrence.

We'd had to look after the garden and the roof too. We'd tried our best, but rather than see our parents' beloved home fall into disrepair because of us, we had decided to move out when I graduated middle school.

The apartments in our building were a little too small for families, and for that reason there had been a lot of elderly couples there, who had moved for similar reasons. Snow is annoying. Plus, it's heavy. But at the apartment building, the owner of the property was in charge of shoveling snow, which had meant the residents didn't need to do it.

On top of that, the apartment had been built with reinforced concrete, so it was a lot warmer than the single-family home. There were no stairs, and the common areas were free to use. The manager of the building had also always been there, and would look after the belongings of the residents while they were away, which was probably another reason why so many elderly people lived there.

As a result, a young brother and sister who had lost their parents stood out, and our new neighbors had looked after us a lot. Everyone had been really kind, or maybe they'd just had a lot of free time. They would stop us sometimes to offer pickled or boiled vegetables, which helped with meals. I had also amassed a large number of *chirimen* straps over time, a kind of Japanese traditional cloth woven into a strap used as a keychain. They were really cute, but it eventually got to the point where I didn't know what to do with all of them.

And then, the elderly people we'd gotten to know had passed

away one by one. It was unavoidable, but it was always sad.

"It can't be helped. If it bothers you that much, you shouldn't get to know them in the first place."

...I could still remember what my long-time boyfriend had said to me at that time.

It hadn't mattered whether his statement had been an attempt at consoling me, an expression of his anger at me for being upset about something inevitable, or evidence of how indifferent he had been regarding interpersonal relationships.

When I had responded, "Yeah," I'd been able to feel a part of my heart breaking.

It may have been natural, but that hadn't stopped it from being sad, and it hadn't changed how lonely I'd felt. I hadn't been looking for him to comfort me or anything anyway; I'd just wanted him to listen. We had somehow ended up dating for six years while never really figuring out those conflicting values.



BY the time I had finished recalling my distant past, the medical examination had finished. After that, it was time for tea. The doctor talked about what had happened at the clinic that morning. Some children there had been rowdy as they waited for their mother to have a check-up.

"Mark was looking after them, but he's not very good at it. He's more helpful working with me as an assistant. Well, I guess that can't be helped," the doctor mused. I felt sorry for the children having to deal with Mark.

I mean, he's fine with people in general, but he doesn't really wear his heart on his sleeve. Or maybe it's that he sets clear boundaries with people right away. Kids are sensitive to stuff like that.

When I had first met him, I felt like he was being very wary. Now that I'd seen him often, he wasn't like that anymore, or maybe he was just trying to emulate the doctor's behavior, but it also seemed like he had begun to warm up to people. *I'm probably around four years older than him, but he's so...*

Well, putting that to the side, he doesn't seem the type to be willing to play with children.

He was tall and had blond hair and blue eyes. He looked like

he could easily have been a prince, and he was very popular with the young women in the village. However, he himself didn't seem particularly delighted by the attention. He didn't take advantage of it at all and mostly just acted like he wasn't interested. It seemed like he was already past his prime, even though he was younger than me.

You're making me worry.

Oh! Does he bat for the other team? Oops, sorry, I didn't realize. I'll make sure to ask him discreetly next time. I'm straight myself, but I'm very open-minded, so it's all good! I won't look at him differently or anything. Ah, I should have asked Yuuko-chan about this. I really don't know a lot about it, or at least not enough to be able to give him any advice. But I'll definitely support him! I've got this!

As I was daydreaming, the doctor made a joke about hiring a nanny. *Hmm, what?* I interrupted their conversation, borrowing Lady Adelaide's hand to talk with.

This world's culture and lifestyle were similar to Europe's, a long time ago. Books were expensive. We couldn't waste paper for just anything, so I did most of my communication by borrowing someone's palm and writing on it with a finger.

"Ah, I wonder if you mean a small school building for children? We don't have anything like that," Lady Adelaide responded.

I had thought as much, but I was still surprised there was no kindergarten or nursery school.

"Did your world have 'teachers' instead of nannies?" Dr. Daniel asked.

Ah, the doctor is interested in that.

"Yeah, we did."

Nursery school and kindergarten teachers were a little different from nannies, though. Actually, I had been licensed as a kindergarten teacher. It hadn't helped with my sales job at all.

As I wrote about my experience, the doctor looked deep in thought for a moment, then suggested the idea that I could go to the clinic once or twice a week, even if just for half the day, to look after the children there.

"I wonder if you could be of help with the mothers who visit with small children or the elderly," he mused.

In short, I'd look after them while he examined their mothers. Knowing that they could go to the doctor and leave their children

or elderly relatives with someone who could look after them would allow them to visit the clinic for regular check-ups before they had any worrisome symptoms.

“The people in the village know you’re a Spirit Caller. And you went to the women’s meeting before, right? You won’t be able to communicate by writing with children who can’t read, but you should be fine other than that,” he continued.

“That’s right. Her wounds are already better, and if she starts going out more...I’ll feel relieved knowing she’s with you, Daniel,” Lady Adelaide added.

“I’ll make sure you receive a proper wage, too,” Dr. Daniel said with a playful look. *If there’s anything I can do to help, I’d like to do it anyway.* He then said, “You should be fine.” I was grateful he had faith in me. If I had heard it from anybody else, I would just assume they were trying to butter me up, hoping to get closer to a Caller.

But I can trust Dr. Daniel. There are plenty of reasons why, but mainly it’s because Lady Adelaide trusts him.

“How about it, Margaret?” the doctor asked.

And that’s how it was decided. I had made good use of my break between chores, and starting from next week, I would be looking after children at the clinic.



AFTER the doctor left, I was in the scullery doing some laundry when there was a knock at the door.

“Margaret, would you want to wear this when you go help out at the clinic? It’s a pretty hardy fabric, and any dirt won’t really stand out,” Lady Adelaide asked as she came into the room.

She was holding a richly dyed dress. When I had a closer look at it, I saw that it was made from a woven fabric with a basic design. Around the collar and the hem was a delicate lace. The sleeves seemed easy to move around in, and when I tried it on, it fit perfectly.

“It suits me well, if I do say so myself.”

“Oh wow, wonderful! All right, you can have this then. But are you sure you don’t want me to get you something newer?” she asked. “These clothes are quite old-fashioned... I like wearing them myself, but maybe you want something more modern—”

Lady Adelaide finally accepted that I really liked the dress only after I reassured her multiple times. And to be honest, her clothes were cute. They used a lot of fabric without destroying the silhouette, and didn't require a corset. The skirts were long, but easy to move around in.

Naturally, the clothes the women in the village wore were different from Lady Adelaide's style and focused more attention on the waist and the chest. I guess if I were to talk about it like how they saw it, it was similar to the difference between wearing a kimono and modern clothes, but it wasn't exactly like that. After all, dresses are completely different. *I think it's natural to go for the one you prefer. And I've heard that corsets are needed to wear more modern clothes, so I get it.*

We lived in the countryside, so there weren't many fashionable people around, but apparently in the Royal Capital, there was an emphasis on fashion that Lady Adelaide wasn't too keen on. It seemed that Lady Adelaide had rarely agreed on clothes with her daughter-in-la—*ah, they're divorced, so her son's ex-wife.*

"It's not that what I was saying was wrong, but...I guess I shouldn't have taken an attitude with her," Lady Adelaide had once murmured sadly.

But she wasn't an unreasonable person, so I doubted clothes had been the only reason for their disagreement.

Lady Adelaide had taken care of her own clothes when she was young. It was probably not that impressive a feat for a noblewoman, but either way, I understood her completely.

I'm approaching thirty, and I already find myself not that attracted to new clothes, instead rotating through clothes that I already like, even if they're not the current trend... Ah, I know what this is, my old woman transformation is almost complete. That doesn't mean I'll accept it, though! I'll fight back.

Lady Adelaide had given me her clothes without any hesitation. I was grateful. I had some clothes here already, but I'd basically sewn or ordered them myself. Once I was completely recovered, it seemed I would have to go to the Royal Capital as a Caller anyway, so I was hoping I could have a look at some fabric for more clothes while I was there.

You could get to the Royal Capital and back from Miselle in a day, so a lot of people went there to do their shopping, meaning that the products sold in Miselle were more for everyday life. *Well, I*

haven't really set out much, and we have people who deliver food and other items directly to the mansion. I've never really had to go out and buy anything, so I haven't seen for myself. I had gotten my information from the village women's meeting.

Once I had been able to walk, I had attended the women's meeting.

The news of a Caller appearing hadn't yet been made official, but there were already rumors. Rather than hiding myself away, I had decided to go out in public—but I avoided causing any real commotion, as per the doctor's advice.

The village wasn't that large, so any unknown faces were bound to attract attention, which could lead to people making unfair assumptions about Lady Adelaide taking in someone whose origins were unknown.

The doctor had gone ahead and told the village head and the villagers about me. It was probably a good idea that the doctor they trusted the most had been the one to tell them, so there hadn't been any weird rumors.

The women at the meeting seemed a little perplexed by the Caller's presence there. However, they were relieved to realize quickly that I was just a normal person. We chatted about makeup and hairstyles rather than anything heavier, which made it easier for everyone to feel comfortable talking to me.

That was how I heard about which stores sold meat, vegetables, and other food in the village. It seemed that a lot of people baked their own sweets at home, so there weren't many bakeries or confectionaries.

It all felt *really* old-fashioned. Kind of like they were all Amish. I'd heard that there was a specialty sweet store in the Royal Capital that people went to if they wanted to give sweets as gifts.

"If any of your pain comes back, tell Daniel right away. Don't push yourself too hard," Lady Adelaide told me as she fixed my hair after I tried on the dress. I could see in her eyes that she was a little bit worried about me. *Ah, she's way too kind.*

I hadn't had anyone worry about my well-being in a long time, so whenever she told me not to overdo it, I was so happy that I wanted to overdo it. When I had done that and given myself a fever, I had caused Lady Adelaide so much worry. Since coming here, I was starting to learn how to look after myself more.

Thank you for everything, I thought. Then I nodded, my heart

full of gratitude.

Interlude: Daniel Reynolds

MISELLE was a countryside village of average size near the Royal Capital. Actually, it was up for debate whether it was technically a town or a village, but that didn't change the fact that it was in the countryside. In any case, it was a relaxed, traditional place with a large population of elderly people.

I had quit working in the Royal Capital, citing my age as the reason. After moving here, it had taken a long time before I became familiar with the residents. I thought I would finally settle down in the remote countryside as the lone doctor in the region, but nobody could have predicted how life would turn out.



IT was early in the morning on a clear day. Surprisingly, we didn't have many patients, so my assistant Mark and I were taking advantage of the break to enjoy some tea together when a large dog I knew very well burst into the clinic.

"Oh, Buddy," I greeted the dog. "What's happened? Calm down, boy."

The usually obedient dog pulled on the hem of my white jacket with his teeth and desperately tried to tug me along. I gave him some water, restoring some calm to the clinic.

"Doctor, maybe something happened to Lady Adelaide...?" Mark suggested.

Buddy hastily finished drinking all his water, then got back to trying to get us to come with him, this time by pulling on the hem of Mark's pants. I put on the shoes I wore for home visits and left a notice on the door to the clinic saying that I would be out.

"All right, let's go," I said. "Mark, you're coming too."

...I wonder what's happened to Addie.

I thought of my slightly younger childhood friend, trying to conceal my uneasiness and appear calm as I headed out. All sorts of horrible situations ran through my mind. Even though I had told

her to get a lodger, it would be my fault for not working harder to persuade her. As I pushed on ahead, I tried to convince myself that she had seemed fine when I'd seen her the other day, but the familiar road had never felt this long before.

But what awaited me at the mansion wasn't a gravely injured Addie—it was a Spirit Caller with life-threatening injuries.



“YOU’LL be going along to Lady Adelaide’s today, too, right?” Mark said, seemingly reminded of it as I ate an early lunch.

It had been two months since that day. The Caller, whose name was Margaret, had now mostly recovered from her injuries, but I would still need to do regular house calls for the foreseeable future. As I explained that point, Mark waited like a child excited to share his most precious secret. As soon as I stopped talking, he began to tell me about what had happened that morning. I smiled wryly as I listened.

That girl again. I told her if she doesn't take it easy, her wounds won't heal!

Once her wounds were fully healed, I would accompany her to the Royal Capital so she could have an audience at the Royal Palace. Before then, it was possible that someone would be dispatched here from the Magic Academy, but if possible, I wanted her to recover from her wounds in Miselle.

I had read that transmigrating between worlds could place a heavy burden on the body, but it didn't seem her wounds had been caused by only that.

I had broached the topic lightly, and she appeared to think that she had been involved in an accident and died as a result. In that case, her wounds would make sense. The fact that she had only suffered external wounds and that there had been no serious head trauma or internal damage was nothing short of a miracle—that, or the Spirits had likely orchestrated it in some way.

She seemed to have no attachment to her previous world, which could have been a result of her near-death experience. And at first, there had been many times when she'd appeared to be deep in thought, but lately I hadn't seen her that way too often. I did think that if she had lost her memories, which had happened to other

Callers in the past, she would have been less sorrowful.

Fortunately, she possessed a refined strength and was very adaptive. Since there was no way for us to send her home, I could only hope that she would continue to grow accustomed to life here.



“**IS** she really twenty-eight?” Mark asked. “She doesn’t look at all older than me.”

“It could be that their calendars are different,” I posited. “She might be quite young. Though she did say she was a student until the age of twenty and had been working for eight years after that, so I don’t doubt that she’s a mature adult. She can drink alcohol, too.”

“She certainly can,” Mark said with a laugh as he recalled a time when the four of us had eaten together the previous month. Margaret had gotten drunk off of one glass of what had been intended as an *apéritif*. She had remained in good spirits from beginning to end, happily singing a song—although no sound had come out, of course. Even a young adult who had just grown out of childhood would have been fine with that amount of alcohol.

Still, the fact Mark was bringing her up again piqued my interest and my gaze naturally slid over to look at his face.

My pupil wasn’t the type to show emotions easily, but recently, whenever the conversation had turned to Margaret, I had noticed him beginning to loosen up. I wondered if she had also noticed.

“It’s impressive that she was in school until she was twenty. Wouldn’t that make her a scholar or a researcher?” Mark asked.

“It appears that in her country, you aren’t a fully-fledged adult until the age of twenty. It seems even commoners study up until the age of twenty-two, while doctors and scholars study for even longer,” I responded.

This country had a high level of education compared to the surrounding countries, but even here, the highest level of education only went until the age of eighteen. Commoners usually began work at thirteen or fourteen years of age.

“I don’t think I could become a doctor in Margaret’s world,” Mark admitted.

"I don't think I could, either," I agreed.

We laughed together as we finished eating. Not long after, a mother visited the clinic, her child in tow, thus starting the afternoon appointments.

The mother was the patient. I asked Mark, who was exhausted from looking after the children, if he could take care of the clinic while I headed to Addie's. Mark wasn't the best at childcare, but he was capable when it came to medical examinations and treatments. The only reason he was still here as an assistant was because he had yet to report to the Royal Palace as an independent physician. He was skilled enough to go at any time, but it seemed he wanted to wait until he could use it as an opportunity to see what his parents were up to. He didn't have the best relationship with them.

If nothing crazy came up while I was at Addie's, Mark would be fine on his own, and in fact, the many young women who had taken a fancy to him would probably crowd around him as patients. Mark could have done Margaret's house call and had a look at the condition of her injuries rather than me, but I had already said I would go to discuss the report to the Royal Palace. The reality was that I just wanted to see Margaret and spend time with Addie.



BACK on that first day, once I had administered basic first aid, I had taken Margaret into the mansion where I'd administered actual medical treatment using magic. Then, once I had finished treating her, we attempted to take the unconscious girl to the clinic. However, we had been stopped by Addie, who looked displeased.

"What are you doing? I'll look after her here," she had said.

"She may be a Caller, but we don't know what kind of person she is," I had responded. "She might be dangerous. Having to nurse someone back to health is just going to be a burden, surely?"

"She won't be a burden at all. And she's a girl! I don't care if you're taking her to a clinic or not, I won't let her be left in a place with only men," Addie had insisted. "Not to mention...she's not a bad person. Our eyes met briefly, so I know."

She had seemed just as stubborn this time as the times she'd said no to taking on a lodger in the past. After knowing her for as long as I had, I was certain there would be no way to change her

mind. I made frequent house visits to keep a close eye on the situation...but it soon became clear that my fears were unfounded.

Margaret was a gentle girl. She was sociable, easy to get along with, and she always greeted everyone with a smile. On the one hand, Margaret was incredibly open with both Addie and me. She wore her heart on her sleeve. It was possible that she would have been less forthcoming if she could talk, but even then, I didn't think she'd be capable of hiding anything. I felt bad for doubting her in the first place.

As for Mark, he seemed to be waiting to see how it played out at first. If she had been an ordinary lady, maybe he would have found her attractive, but when I tried to push the topic with him, he just said, "She's probably popular. I can see why," and then acted like he wasn't that interested as he played with Buddy.

Margaret didn't seem all that concerned with Mark's good looks or noble lineage, so I wondered if that was why he had let his guard down eventually. That, or he was drawn in by her childish, innocent smile that only Addie and I usually got to see. It was probably a mixture of both. At any rate, if my pupil had begun to show interest in someone, I would wholeheartedly support it.

Margaret appeared to be a fully grown adult, but when we heard she was twenty-eight, we'd had to confirm it repeatedly to the point that she started to look confused. At that age, she would normally be married with two or three children, but she was single. It seemed such a scenario wasn't that rare in her world.

She had long black hair that fell to her shoulders, and one dark brown eye and one light amber eye. She seemed very knowledgeable. I wondered if her eyes had changed colors when she had crossed worlds. She was often calm, but sometimes she did childish things, and she had a strange, incongruous air about her.

Her vision wasn't that good, and whenever she needed to express herself, she needed a piece of paper or someone's palm to write on, which meant that she had to be close to someone if she wanted to have a conversation with them. I had told her countless times to be careful about that when talking to men in the village so that they wouldn't fall in love with her, but I wasn't sure if she fully understood what I meant.

She was a stable person in some ways, but she also had a bit of a dangerous streak. She was generally good-natured and not the type to doubt people. We rarely ever saw anyone bold enough to

cause trouble in the village, so it was mostly peaceful. But I would have to make sure to warn her sufficiently when we headed to the Royal Capital.

Ever since Margaret had started living with Addie, Addie's expression had been getting gentler with each passing day. She was now as energetic as she had been back when she was still a young unmarried lady. Margaret would be going to the Royal Palace as soon as her injuries were healed, but fortunately, she had also asked for advice about how to stay with Addie for as long as possible.

If I had to describe Addie's way of life in one word, that word would be: old-fashioned. Not only did she not use many magical tools, but she also did everything on her own, from cooking to cleaning and even yard work. While I had no idea how it usually was for countryside aristocrats, it did occur to me that it wasn't really the sort of work that suited the wife of a count.

I was of the belief that her strong will and stubbornness had kept her in the capital, where she didn't fit in at all, until the death of her husband and then the marriage of her son. I knew her resistance to having any live-in servants was due to the less-than-peaceful life she had led at the count's residence, so I was aware that I shouldn't belabor the issue.

Addie led an inconvenient life, but surprisingly, Margaret enjoyed it. She had originally lived in a world without magic, so it seemed that magic and magical tools made her uneasy because they were unfamiliar to her.

She had been surrounded by all sorts of helpful items in her old world, and she'd once said that living with Addie was like going back in time fifty years, but even then, she found it more comfortable than using magical tools, and she didn't have any problem doing odd jobs. She had gone on to say, with a smile, that in her old world she'd led a life ruled by her job, so now she wanted to experience a more hands-on way of life.

It was harder to persuade Addie. An esteemed person whom the Spirits had personally summoned to this world would absolutely have to go to the Royal Palace when her injuries had healed. It was for Margaret's benefit, but she didn't give in.

"She can go anywhere she wants," Addie had said. "The Royal Palace will gladly take her in. She's still young, and it's probably a lot better for her there than here..."

"I don't agree. That's just plain disrespectful to her," I had

responded.

Ever since Addie had found Margaret and started taking care of her despite their inability to talk out loud together, it had felt like Addie was easing loneliness that she probably hadn't even realized she had. Thinking back to how she had been sold into the family of a count, and everything else until now, there was no way I would relent this time.

"But—"

"Addie, I see the two of you as parent and child. I can't believe it's only been a month. I truly believe the reason she appeared in your back garden was so she could meet you."

"Daniel..."

"Don't worry. She seems happy here."

In the end, it was Margaret's honest goodwill that finally got Addie, who was reluctant until the last moment, to agree to let her stay.



WHEN I arrived at the mansion, there was a sweet smell coming from the kitchen. Judging by the pleasant tanginess wafting through the air, I knew that Margaret had accomplished one of her long-term goals. I smiled as I knocked on the door.

"Hey, are you finally making strawberry jam?"

"..."

"She said she'll share some with you when it's done. Lucky you, Daniel," Addie said.

Watching them in their old-fashioned but stylish clothes, laughing together while they cooked, they looked like a picture book happy mother and daughter come to life. It was a scene I longed for myself, yet was unable to have. I felt somewhat wistful, my heart softening.

Margaret had finished her first jars of jam. I called her over and spoke to her as I checked how she was healing.

"I'll help you with dance practice too, but I have to ask that you wait until your wounds have fully healed first," I told her with a smile after divulging that Mark had seen her dancing.

"!" Her eyes widened with shock.

"There's a little side path in the forest that you can't see from

the fields. Mark often takes it to gather medicinal herbs,” I added. “I’ve already got permission from Addie to use it.”

Margaret’s face went red, and she smiled awkwardly. As I had thought, there was no way she could have hidden anything up her sleeve. She was innocent like a child, and I caught myself patting her on the head.

Once I had finished her checkup, I was handed some freshly baked bread and two jars of jam. Margaret held her index finger up to her elegant lips and winked as if to say, “This is hush money to keep the dancing a secret.”

Now I’m torn about giving any of this to Mark.

Interlude: Mark Disraeli

SINCE birth, I've never really been interested in anything.

I was born as the illegitimate son to a count, so it wasn't the most pleasant upbringing. I was raised away from the mansion, hated by the count's wife and children, and forced to watch as my mother was manipulated by a man she couldn't even call her husband. I guess the only blessing was that I never had to worry about finances.

My activities were restricted, though not to the extent of my half-siblings'. The only time I was really free was when I was reading, so as a result, I ended up reading every book in our mansion. But even then, nothing piqued my interest. I just continued to read as a temporary escape from the people who controlled me.

As time went on, differences appeared between me and my half-siblings, particularly when it came to our academics and our looks. It didn't make them very happy, so they began lobbing undue criticism my way. When I didn't respond to their childish attacks, they began to escalate. I probably should have responded in some way, but I figured that if I made them realize it was pointless to pick on me, they would leave me alone. That backfired.

It was about six months before graduation. Regardless of whether I was to enter a research facility or prepare for a position in parliament, I had no interest in my future. I took a very laissez-faire approach to how I spent my days. And while there was still discord between me and my half-siblings, I never imagined they would make an attempt on my life.



I escaped down a back alley in the Royal Capital, clutching my abdomen as I hid in a secluded corner. I had just been stabbed by a man I assumed my half-siblings had hired to kill me.

“Oh, what are you doing here in a place like this? Surely this

isn't the best day for a game of hide and seek, is it?"

Startled by the sudden voice, I turned around to face a tall, slender man. He was well dressed, but I was unable to see his face under the shadow of his hat.

A heavy mixture of sleet and rain was coming down, so he was certainly right that it wasn't the most ideal weather for playing outside. However, it was a little difficult to determine why this middle-aged man had called out to me at all, especially given that he seemingly had his own reasons for being out in this weather.

I had managed to successfully defend myself, so the wound wasn't that deep, but it would be a problem if he realized I was gushing blood. I could still hear the voices of my pursuers ringing in my ears. I had no time to be getting involved with this man.

"...If you...don't want to...be involved...I-leave..." I urged him in a halting voice.

"Hmm, I wish I could do that, but you see, I'm a doctor. I can't just ignore an injured person," the man replied.

"Ah, hey, what are you...g-gah—"

Contrary to his laid-back tone, he deftly held me down on the ground and I felt the sensation of healing magic pouring into my wound. It seemed he had used a large quantity of magic, but I was starting to get dizzy from the pain.

"All right, I've gotten the wound under control. Now, I think I'll sit with you a bit longer," the middle-aged man said kindly.

I felt my consciousness slowly fading to darkness and calmly thought to myself, *I wonder if he's working for them too.*



I woke up in a simple and clean bed. There was a window nearby, and I could also see three other beds that were all covered with modesty curtains hanging from the ceiling. There seemed to be other people behind the curtains.

My head still felt cloudy, but I could hear their voices one after another.

"...urts...and here also hur...okay?"

"Yeah...That's just the season for you. There's a lot of that, especially rain..."

"...ight! It's such an intense pain, I can't handle it."

I must be in a medical clinic. The voices of older women complaining about hip pain continued, followed by a calm male voice comforting them. Then there were patients with stomach pains, sprains, children with fevers—there was no end to it. The clinic was busy. The man with the calming voice, who appeared to be the doctor, was quelling everyone’s concerns before sending them home.

I started dozing off, listening to the voices like they were lullabies.

“Oh, how are you feeling? Is your head feeling any better?” a voice called out to me.

Before I knew it, all the other patients had left. It was raining outside, so it was difficult to tell what time of day it was, but judging from how dark the room was, I suspected it was evening. The light at the back of the examination room was shining from behind the doctor, making it difficult for me to see his expression.

“Ah, you don’t have to get up,” he said. “Your wound closed up, but it’s not completely healed. You’re young and energetic, though, so if you just stay lying down until morning, you should be able to move again. For now, you should sleep. We’ll talk later.”

Then he patted me on the head like I was a child and added, “Your pursuers won’t follow you here, so sleep well and recover,” before leaving the room again.

How many years has it been since someone patted me on the head like that? Can I trust him? I was suspicious, but as I watched the curtain rustle slightly in the doctor’s wake, I wondered why I felt oddly at ease. Then I closed my eyes again.



THE man introduced himself as Daniel Reynolds. He was the doctor who worked here in Miselle, a village not far from the Royal Capital. I recognized his name.

“Weren’t you the head doctor at the Royal Palace, Dr. Reyno —” I started.

“It’s Dr. Daniel. I’m retired,” he responded.

It almost sounded like he was trying to hide who he was, but I was just surprised to find myself in front of a doctor whose name every noble knew. I found it hard to believe that there were many

people who knew how much magic they would need to administer to a wound just from looking at it. I was confident this was the man himself.

He said he had been heading to the library to return a book, had come across an old bookstore on the way, and as he had gone to stop by it on his way back home, he had found me in that back alley.

"I've always been good at finding children who are hiding away," he added nonchalantly.

At that point, I finally lowered my guard and told him everything that had happened, perhaps due to his name or just his general presence. But I wasn't being naïve; he really seemed like he would be understanding, like he wouldn't deny or refuse me in any way... He seemed open-minded. That was probably the word I was looking for.

"I see... I have heard a bit about the prestigious Disraeli family. You're the accomplished son everyone's talking about, I see. So, Mark. What do you want to do?" Dr. Daniel asked.

"What do you mean?" I responded.

"Do you want to take down your siblings and fulfill your destiny as the count's heir? Or do you want to choose another path? Do you want to get revenge? Or do you want to keep running away?"

I hadn't thought about any of those choices. I did find it annoying that my siblings had gotten me like that, but that was the extent of it. I felt no emotions in general. I just lived day to day. I was only still alive because I hadn't died. I had no plans to die, nor did I have any plans to live and actually do something.

Dr. Daniel probably saw right through me. He chuckled as he handed me another cup of warm tea.

"You need time. As for your wound, well, it's mostly healed by now, but it's probably best that you stay here a little longer anyway. It might help you decide what you want to do," he said.

"...You're just letting me stay here?"

"You'll have to work to pay for your treatment," he teased lightly. I would never be able to afford the fees just by working here a little. "You have enough credits to graduate, right?" he continued. "I know a few of the lecturers at the academy, so I'll speak to them. For now, focus on getting better. You probably already noticed, but that blade was laced with poison. You're lucky you didn't die on the

spot.”

“I guess even their attempts at poisoning me ended in vain...” I said dryly, making more of a statement than anything.

“Well, I was actually thinking that was something you should be mad about...”

I didn’t understand why he frowned with such a troubled look on his face.



I was introduced to patients as a student assistant Dr. Daniel had brought back from the Royal Capital. Country life was peaceful. Throughout the afternoon, I would assist the doctor by following his instructions, and at night, I would borrow something from his personal library to read.

Learning about the healing arts was actually interesting. It was the first time I had ever had fun learning something, and it surprised me.

As time went on, I had all sorts of questions. I often wondered if the lack of patients had something to do with the peaceful villagers just not getting badly hurt. I couldn’t help wondering why he only had patients who didn’t make full use of his skills as the former head doctor of the Royal Palace.

He could have made so much money working with nobles, but had chosen instead to work in a small village, where he barely made a profit.

Why did he help me in the first place? He had said himself that he couldn’t just ignore a wounded person, but he could easily have sent me home after treating me and that would have been the end of it. Why had he taken me in instead...? There was a lot I didn’t know about Dr. Daniel.



“**DANIEL**, long time no see, my friend. Ah, that must be your new assistant. It’s nice to meet you,” the elegant woman said by way of greeting. She seemed to be around the same age as Dr. Daniel.

I was told we’d be making a house call and had been taken to a lord’s mansion that stood in front of a forest. A large dog named

Buddy and the widow of a late count, Adelaide Dustin, lived together there.

“Addie, how are things?” Dr. Daniel asked. “This is Mark Disraeli. I brought him from the Royal Capital.”

We were both aware of the meaning behind one another’s family names, but we didn’t broach the topic as Lady Adelaide went about preparing some afternoon tea, even though we were supposed to be there for a house call. Her response to his remark about me was a casual, “Oh, you picked up a fine addition from the capital.”

There were no servants at the mansion. Laid out on the table before us were a variety of pastries that Lady Adelaide had baked herself, as well as a fragrant tea that she had poured for us. Seeing my boss relax into the sofa, I realized this must have been a common occurrence.

Lady Adelaide’s clothes and lifestyle didn’t seem modern. They felt outdated, but it was also as if time itself had stopped here, and she just happened to be someone from the time when it had stopped. No doubt Lady Adelaide and Dr. Daniel had known each other for a long time, and met to drink tea regularly under the guise of a “house call.” After we spent a relaxing afternoon together, we left the mansion without any mention of a next time. But it was obvious that there would be a next time without having to explicitly say it.

We headed back toward the clinic. The evening sky looked like it was smoldering as the sun set.

“...You’re in this village because of her, aren’t you?” I asked Dr. Daniel.

“That’s right. She’s important to me.”

I was startled by how blunt Dr. Daniel was. He suddenly stopped, then looked directly at me.

“Mark, lofty titles and wealth are meaningless if you don’t have them when it counts,” he said sadly. “I couldn’t save her. The reality of that will never go away, no matter what I accomplished after the fact.”

Where did that come from? I thought to myself. After a moment’s pause, I realized that he had once spoken about this when we had first met, but it had never come up since.

“If there are things you can obtain and achieve now, then it’s best you do. One day, that’ll save you. When you have something that you want to protect, what you have built up will help you.”

“...I don’t have anything I want to protect,” I responded.

“You don’t know what the future holds.”

He said it like he was joking, but the expression on his face was tense.

“For now, you should start with accepting the goodwill people have toward you. I’m not saying you have to fall in love with someone. You don’t have to return goodwill, either. For now, just accept their words and their feelings. Eventually, you’ll remember that you’re human. You are only human, after all, Mark,” he continued. “If you don’t see yourself as a human being, they won’t either. That’s why they thought they could kill you so easily. Of course, they’re the ones who are in the wrong.”

Those words struck me in the heart as we stood under the sky that the setting sun had dyed shades of red and orange, and I never let them go.



I ended up spending four months in Miselle. After I had returned to the Royal Capital and graduated from the academy, Dr. Daniel arranged for me to attend the Royal Clinic, where I learned the basics of the healing arts.

Once I entered the Royal Clinic, the squabble over who would be heir was momentarily on pause, and now that I had *the* Daniel Reynolds supporting me, the attempts on my life stopped, too.

During my time at the Royal Clinic, I gained a great deal of knowledge and skills, and while I couldn’t call them friends, I made a few acquaintances, too. Afterward, I returned to Miselle.

“...I didn’t ask for you.”

“I thought I’d invite myself here as your assistant,” I said with a smirk.

“You’re a funny one, aren’t you?” the familiar doctor said as he once again took me in. I had decided I would rather spend my days with this person than with my biological parents.

“I’ll look after you until you breathe your last,” I continued with a haughty laugh.

“Here’s me finding that kind of attitude nostalgic. I’ve really lost it,” Dr. Daniel said.

I had been laughing, but the way Dr. Daniel glared at me made

me stop and bow deeply instead.



JUST like that, time passed, bringing me to the present.

After breakfast, but before the clinic opened, I headed to the forest to pick up some herbs to last us the next few days. The healing arts worked well on external wounds, but for internal wounds, additional medicine was necessary. We had some herbs growing at the clinic, but a wide variety of medicinal herbs grew in the forest on the property belonging to the countess, and the doctor and I had permission to harvest them.

I harvested the herbs in front of me, and then, as I headed down a small pathway behind the mansion's back garden, I heard Buddy barking happily.

When I looked over in the direction of the barks, I saw Margaret with a wooden basket in her hand, twirling around as she gathered strawberries. With her long black hair swaying in the wind, and her skirt fluttering around her, it seemed like the sun was only shining on her, illuminating everything in her immediate vicinity. I felt like I could almost hear a song playing faintly on the wind.

I had paused to watch her when she suddenly crouched down and grabbed her ankle. *That's right. If Dr. Daniel hadn't been the one to heal her wounds, she still wouldn't be able to walk without crutches.*



I remembered the day she had first arrived. She had been lying sideways on the grass in this very garden. She was badly wounded, like she had fallen from a high place or been hit by a horse carriage. It was a miracle she was even still breathing. When we saw her strange clothing and exposed leg wound, the doctor and I were speechless.

"...This is bad," the doctor mumbled to himself as he asked Lady Adelaide, who had lost all the color in her face, to go fetch some water and blankets.

"First of all, we need to at least make it so we can move her... Huh. It can't be..."

Dr. Daniel talked as he worked. Before he could take care of her wounds, he did a full examination, and I could tell he was reasonably shaken.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“She has no magical ability.”

At first, I didn’t understand what he had said. That simply couldn’t be. She was currently breathing, albeit very shallowly, and she had a pulse. She was still alive even though she had no magical ability?

Shocked, I also used some magic to check her, but it seemed she really didn’t have any magical ability. How could that be?

“Addie said she just appeared here, right?” asked Dr. Daniel.

“Yeah, that Buddy found her lying here unconscious.”

The doctor, who had been restlessly attending to the woman, stopped suddenly.

“Could she possibly be...”

A person who had appeared out of nowhere. She didn’t look like she was from our country, but she was wearing clothes that didn’t seem to be from any surrounding country either. She had no magical ability, even though absolutely every living thing in the world did... The only possible answer was—

“A Spirit Caller?” Dr. Daniel and I said in unison.

I still remembered the commotion it had caused the last time a Spirit had appeared in the Royal Forest.

“...Mark, I’ll leave her upper body to you. It seems like she landed on her back, so you’ll have to act as a temporary support when we move her, carefully and slowly,” the doctor ordered. “I’ll examine her leg.”

“O-Okay,” I responded.

She was covered in serious injuries, but her left leg and foot were the most severely wounded. It looked like it had been crushed by a large rock or something. There was a large open gash where her broken bone and damaged tendons were visible. The one saving grace was that there wasn’t a lot of blood.

“I wonder if I can even close the wound...”

Hinting that she may be left unable to walk permanently, the doctor continued to pour healing magic into the injured leg. The woman was still on her side. Her eyes remained closed as her face contorted in pain. A chill ran down my spine as I looked at her pale cheeks.

A Spirit Caller was someone who had great influence not only over the country, but over the entire continent. They were incredibly important. If this woman really was a...no, she was. I knew it deep down.

But even though her very existence was fantastical, like this, she was just another patient. We would have to do everything we could to save her. I administered treatment, following the doctor's orders. When I had finished, I looked up at him. Sweat was beading on his forehead and his brows were knitted in consternation. Once he finished treating her, he placed his finger on her leg.

"Great work, as always," I said. "If it weren't for you, she wouldn't have made it."

Although her injuries were still serious, Dr. Daniel had performed an almost perfect procedure to the extent that you would never think he was only stabilizing her condition. Her broken bone had even been set, which would never have been possible for another doctor. However, Dr. Daniel still didn't seem pleased.

"This isn't just my work," he said. "It felt like there was a... different, bigger power helping me."

Before I could ask what he meant by that, I saw Lady Adelaide rushing over with blankets and water from the direction of the mansion.



THE woman's—Margaret's—recovery was remarkable. Her lacerations had closed up entirely and hadn't even left any scars. Being able to heal a lot faster than an ordinary person was another benefit of her status as a Spirit Caller. At this rate, I expected her broken arm and severely wounded left leg to heal just as quickly, but that wasn't the case.

As the days went on, her recovery started to slow, and even if we used healing magic, it wasn't as effective as it had been in the beginning. The doctor found it strange that her recovery speed had dropped below even that of an ordinary person here in this world, but there was still a lot we didn't know about Spirit Callers, so all he could say was that maybe that was also a part of it.

While she was still in some pain, she could move both her hands and could walk somewhat. Around that time, I began doing

her regular follow-up appointments instead of Dr. Daniel, who'd gone to the Royal Capital to report the news.

I was headed toward the veranda of the mansion in the forest. I hadn't seen Margaret in a few days, and I found her sitting with Buddy at her feet, surrounded by chamomile flowers cut from the garden. She appeared to be picking the flowers apart and sorting the different pieces, but her face was expressionless as her hands moved almost robotically. The only sound coming from where she was seated was the sound of the flower petals being plucked. I stopped in my tracks a good distance in front of her, not wanting to disturb the scene before me.

The doctor had led Margaret's healing process so far, so I had only met her a few times. However, she seemed much calmer and with a smile more often than not now than in the beginning. When I spoke to her, she would often communicate with a mixture of hand gestures and body language. She had warmed up quite a bit to Dr. Daniel and Lady Adelaide, often displaying innocent expressions around them that belied her age. By contrast, she rarely let her guard down around me, but I had never seen her this expressionless before.

Margaret, despite having lost her voice and suffered grave injuries in the process of being summoned to this world, was always smiling. I had learned in the past month that she meant no harm, though I couldn't deny that she still had an otherworldly presence about her. Seeing her so expressionless now made me realize that she wasn't just a Spirit Caller, but she was also a real living being called "Margaret."

As I stood there watching her, a collection of what looked like small golden specks of dust came flying in from the direction of the forest. *Fairy Lights. Proof that she's a Caller.* Margaret noticed the lights as they flew around her. She lifted her head up, put her flower to one side, then slowly raised her palm upward. The lights all gathered together, and Margaret watched them for a while before finally bursting out laughing, but silently.

It was the kind of laugh that seemed like she was holding back tears. It caused my heart to squeeze and move in a big way.

I had heard from Lady Adelaide that she had never seen Margaret cry, except for that first day when she'd woken up in the mansion. She no doubt missed things about her other world, and she wasn't even here of her own accord, but she still forced herself

to smile and laugh. I couldn't help overlapping her with my past self and feeling more than a little indignant about it.

"...Margaret."

The lights all scattered in different directions at the sound of my voice. Margaret's hair fluttered beautifully as she turned toward me. She seemed surprised. However, once she looked down and realized I was dressed for a medical examination, she seemed to understand the situation and went back to smiling. My heart clenched as I watched her mask her emotions.

We exchanged casual greetings and then I carefully got to work. She changed the direction of the rocking chair she was on as I knelt down, and she then lifted the hem of her skirt without any hesitation, revealing the leg that was covered in bandages. I touched her skin to pour healing magic into it, and she didn't try to stop me. It was normal for her to respond like that to a doctor, and it wasn't like her foot, which was still so swollen she couldn't even put on a shoe, was particularly enticing. Yet there was a piece of me that was less than amused by how unguarded she was with someone who wasn't even that close to her.

She nodded as I told her my findings, but I began to feel slightly agitated by the fact that she was clearly masking her true feelings with a smile.

"Don't you think it's a bit unreasonable not to be angry?" I blurted out suddenly.

Margaret blinked several times in response to my outburst. She tried to speak, then, realizing she couldn't, gave me a wry smile before lowering her eyebrows and spelling out letters with her fingers.

"It's no one's fault."

She meant that blaming someone wouldn't change her situation, and besides, there was no one to blame for it. She then spelled out, *"It's just annoying that I can't help as much as I want,"* using the palm of my hand to trace out the letters.

"You're a really good person for thinking that way," I said.

I couldn't think like that. I wasn't trying to convince myself that was the case, either; I knew deep down it was the truth.

"It's for my own benefit," she explained. Then she wrote, *"Hatred is tiring,"* and placed a hand on her chest, giving me a mischievous glance.

I wonder what would be different if I could think like that. I was

happy with how things were now, so it felt useless to wonder about it, but still...

"...I see."

She nodded, then immediately smiled again, putting some distance between us. That annoyed me, but I knew all too well how to act unbothered, so before I knew it, I was patting her on the head like the doctor usually would.

"..."

Her eyes went wide, and as she realized what I had just done, her cheeks turned bright red. Forgetting to speak using her fingers, she seemed to be trying to protest loudly—although no sound came out—and she clearly didn't appreciate that I was treating her like a child even though I was younger than she was. She clenched both her hands into fists, and it was almost exactly like she was yelling at me, her face still flushed. She didn't look twenty-eight like she had claimed at all.

Huh, so this is all I had to do?

I patted her on the head again to calm her down, but that only made her angrier. I found myself smiling. *That's it, let it all out. You don't have to hide or fake your emotions. You can let all of it out: your worries, the things you miss about your past life, your homesickness...*

For all she protested, she made no attempt to remove my hand from the top of her head. *Does she understand what it means not to push me away?* Finally feeling satisfied, I averted my gaze, and my eyes met with Buddy's. He was lightly wagging his tail.



WITHOUT meaning to, I let out a laugh as I watched Margaret squatting and clutching her ankle in the fields after her little dance, but I also felt a warmth in my heart. Just as I was thinking that I should lend her a hand, she stood back up with her basket as if nothing had happened and carried on walking, Buddy following along with her.

I watched her head back toward the mansion until I could no longer see her, and then I decided to head back myself.

She had refused a cane when we had offered her one, back when she'd been having more trouble walking. But recently, she had somewhat awkwardly admitted that she was afraid if she used a

cane, her leg wouldn't heal all the way.

She hadn't let anyone see how worried she was when she had chosen to try walking on her own, and now, I found myself unable to take my eyes off her.

Since meeting the doctor, I had become more "human," and it meant I was now filled with emotions I didn't know how to handle. I was finally able to see Margaret's different expressions; see her straightforward gaze without having to read between the lines. Her carefree smile when she was with the doctor and Lady Adelaide. Her white fingertips on my palm when she talked—

I knew the name of this emotion. But I didn't want to use such a clichéd word to express what I was feeling.

As for Margaret, she wasn't interested in the special treatment that came with being a Spirit Caller. She didn't need adoration from thousands; she preferred the affection of those closest to her.

I wondered what this world looked like to her and her multicolored eyes, this woman who always projected such a calming energy. I wondered how differently she saw the world from how I did. No doubt for her, it was covered in light. I hoped one day I could learn to see the world how Margaret did.

Chapter 2: A Visitor from the Capital

INSTEAD of an alarm, the songs of the birds from the forest woke me up every morning.

When you hear that, you might think, *Oh, how wonderful!* But honestly, they were so annoying. I didn't wake up and say, "Oh, what a nice morning!" Instead, I woke up thinking, *Oh, the birds sure are energetic today...*

I need some form of volume control for them. I want to be able to hit the snooze button!

I made my bed, got ready, and headed downstairs. My destination was the kitchen. The kitchen always came first. Lady Adelaide was already awake, boiling hot water and beginning the preparations for breakfast. I thought I should be the one to do that, so I tried to get up earlier, but Lady Adelaide always woke up before me. It wasn't like I slept in or anything; she was just always awake before me no matter what.

As a result, Lady Adelaide was the one to prepare breakfast. I cleaned up afterward, and I would be the one preparing lunch. Then, we would prepare dinner together and I would clean up after. We had settled into a nice routine.

I knocked on the door to the kitchen, which was always open, to let Lady Adelaide know it was me, then hugged her to say good morning.

"Good morning, Margaret," she said. "You're taking lunch with you to the clinic today, right?"

I nodded as I held the basket containing my lunch and she told me to take some for Dr. Daniel and Mark as well. It was like she had read my mind, and I grinned.

"...By the way, should I come along with you today?" she asked.

I waved a hand in the air as if to say, "That's all right." Lady Adelaide was worried about me going out by myself for the first time, but I had been to the clinic before, so I knew the way.

For some reason, Lady Adelaide, Dr. Daniel, and even Mark—

who was younger than me—all treated me like a child. I supposed that back in my previous world, Japanese people did often look young to Westerners, so maybe that was also the case in this world. And because I had learned everything I knew about this world from books, I barely knew as much as a child.

However, I was a fully grown, twenty-eight-year-old woman!

“Okay...but don’t push yourself,” Lady Adelaide reminded me.

Then she smiled as she placed her hand on top of my head again. I didn’t pull away this time. She patted me twice, as if to say, “What shall we do with you...” It was the kind of thing a mother would do to her young daughter, and it tickled a little, so I happily closed my eyes.

Once we finished chatting, I picked up a woven wooden basket and headed outside to grab some eggs. That’s right. We had chickens! Chickens that were among the birds that woke me up every morning. One could even say they were the main culprits.

They could really use some volume control. I wonder if they have switches on their backs?

As I headed toward the chicken coop between the back garden and the house, I noticed that there were some greens growing that resembled *komatsuna*, a type of Japanese spinach. *The chickens love this.*

They were different from the chickens in Japan. They were dark brown instead of white, and they were quite small, so they resembled Japanese *chabo* chickens. But their thick, bushy combs were what was most different. They were different from Silkie fowls too. Honestly, their combs looked like a brush, or even a *komatsuna*.

Or Goemon Ishikawa.

They had feathers that stood up like a peacock’s crown and moved when they walked. Their tail feathers were long, too.

Insects didn’t bother me, but I wasn’t great with birds. I didn’t like it when they moved suddenly, or the weird shine of their neck feathers. But since I’d been looking after them every day, I had gotten used to them. They would still sometimes block my way while they were trying to get my attention, though, like an aggressive guy at a singles mixer.

I went inside the chicken coop and lured its occupants to me with the greens they liked so much. Then, while they were eating, I put their eggs into my basket. They always laid their eggs in the same place, which was a big help, and because they were small,

they laid equally small eggs. I guess they would have been S-size eggs in Japan.

There were four cute, light brown eggs today... My eyes shot straight over to the five chickens, who were busy eating the greens. *All right, which one of you took a day off?*

I waved to them as I left. I'd be back later to clean and give them dinner. Buddy was waiting outside for me, his tail wagging from side to side. He had a tiny little fairy riding on his back. *Good morning, Buddy and Ms. Fairy.* I put the egg basket on a table to one side of the garden and then gave each of them a pet.

Ever since I had been able to move again, the fairies had been visiting me less frequently in my room and more often in the garden or on the veranda, usually accompanied by Buddy. *Such a cute little group of friends.*

It seemed they hadn't come to do anything in particular, and once I had fussed over them enough, they would be satisfied and leave. The fairies didn't speak, but they would laugh and fly around and make a sound like, "Kyaa!" Their expressions made them look like children playing Red Light, Green Light.

After that, I headed back to the house with Buddy. Breakfast was already ready; Lady Adelaide was just about to make tea. Today's breakfast was freshly baked bread with bacon and potato soup. There was a fresh, crisp green salad topped with sliced hardboiled eggs. The madeleines we had baked the day before would be served along with the tea. *Ah, and the strawberry jam too, of course.*

I put the eggs into a cupboard, washed my hands, and took my seat. Buddy positioned himself in front of his food too, and we all started eating together.

It was only 6 a.m. *See, I told you I don't sleep in!*



THE mansion was on the outskirts of the village. The clinic, which was in the center of the village, was around fifteen minutes away. My arm had been given a clean bill of health, but my leg and foot still hurt, and I had been told to take it slow, which meant that getting to the clinic would take me longer than fifteen minutes.

Don't worry, everyone, I won't try to dance around this time, I

thought with a wry smile.

With my lunch bag in hand, I walked along with Buddy, who was wagging his tail, enjoying the scenery. It seemed that fully grown single women who wandered around by themselves outside had a bad reputation in this region, so I'd been told to take someone with me whenever I went out, or to take Buddy. It was nice that Buddy was recognized as an acceptable companion. *He is very reliable, after all.*

The unpaved, well-trodden dirt road, the rustling of the trees and bushes, the sound of birds singing... As I got closer to the village center, the roads gradually became brick, and the stone houses had the feel of a European village somewhere, their front gardens filled with butterflies and blooming flowers. I wondered if it was just that I wasn't used to seeing this sort of scenery, so I didn't recognize the mix of colors, or if it was because I was in a different world.

Certain things seemed the same as what I remembered, while others seemed different, and the scenery in particular felt somewhat nostalgic.

The villagers I bumped into weren't used to my presence as a Spirit Caller and were often surprised to see me at first. To be honest, I had been cooped up in Lady Adelaide's estate for so long because of my injuries that I was also briefly startled to see other people. I had gone to the women's meeting in the village, but of course there had only been women there. Everyone else was new to me.

However, I would be living here from now on, and we were in the countryside, so getting to know my neighbors was important. That was definitely a universal truth, no matter what world you were in.

That was why whenever I made eye contact with someone, I would smile and greet them like I had done back at my old sales job. Everyone already knew that I couldn't speak, so I waved to say "Good morning" instead. The villagers never hesitated to greet me in return, and just like the doctor had said, they all seemed to be calm people.

"Ah, Buddy!"

"Miss, are you the Spirit Caller?"

As I carried on greeting everyone I came across, some children who were playing in the street saw Buddy and came running over.

Buddy and I were promptly surrounded by children. I figured they probably couldn't read yet, so instead of trying to communicate in writing, I just nodded.

"I knew it. Are you going to Dr. Daniel's place?"

"I know the way. The doctor's place is this way!"

Oh, it seems like word is out that I'll be helping at the clinic, as expected of a village's information network. It looks like the children will be leading me there. The child who took the lead had eyes that were sparkling with confidence. Another child was staying close to Buddy, and the two running behind me seemed to be brothers. They were treating me so normally, it made me happy. I found myself smiling.

As we began to walk together, a girl who'd been hiding behind everyone else came closer. Thinking something had happened that she wanted to tell me, I bent down. She reached her small hand out to me nervously.

"Mom said...that...your foot is hurt..." said the little girl.

It was so heartwarming. I took her soft hand to hide the fact I was getting choked up.

The other adults seemed startled by our group, but they continued to greet me just like before, and more children joined us as we made our way to the clinic, laughing and having fun together along the way.

The streets were quite busy, but thanks to the children and Buddy, I could fully enjoy the walk. Although I had turned down Lady Adelaide's offer to accompany me, I guess I really was a little nervous about going out in public alone.

The children seemed to like it when I high-fived them as thanks, and they all ran away, clapping their hands together the same way. I patted Buddy on the neck twice as thanks, at which he made a little noise and then turned around to head back. *He's so smart. If he comes to meet me to take me back later, I might fall in love with him.*



Like the other buildings in the village, the clinic was made of stone. Most of the houses in the village were one-story high, but there were lots of shops and whatnot with two stories, including the clinic. Otherwise, it looked like an ordinary house with no sign outside. The first floor served as the clinic, while the second floor was where the doctor lived. And because Mark was renting a house nearby, Dr. Daniel lived there alone.

I placed my hands on the door, which was an amber shade of wood, and took a deep breath. Then I rang the doorbell, which made a *ding-a-ling* sound that served as my morning greeting. I then headed inside.

Since the doctor had always visited me for my follow-up appointments, today was only the second time I'd ever been in the clinic. I looked around the unfamiliar space. There was no reception desk in the waiting room, which had long benches to sit on, and the door right in front led to the clinic. Behind that door, there were beds for patients who were staying over, a sink, a place to write prescriptions, and a break room for the doctor and his assistant cordoned off by a curtain. Behind a partition screen close to the clinic door were the stairs that led to the living quarters upstairs.

I had just noticed a wooden box in the middle of the waiting room when Dr. Daniel emerged from behind the examination room door.

"Hey, welcome. I left your things over there," Dr. Daniel said, then realized I was looking around for Mark. "Hm? Ah, Mark is out delivering a letter right now. He'll be back soon."

I wanted to thank him for carrying my things, but he wasn't there, so I'd have to wait.

The previous evening, when I'd been preparing blankets and toys for the children, Mark had suddenly appeared at the house to take them back to the clinic with him. When I'd offered to go with him, he had declined, saying it was already getting dark, so I shouldn't worry about it.

He's such a chivalrous hottie. I wonder if he's a prince. Or maybe he still just thinks of me as a kid he has to look out for.

The village didn't have many street lights, so it got really dark after sunset. That was especially true around Lady Adelaide's house. There were no other houses around and her property was surrounded by a forest, so if I were to go out at night like I did back

in Japan, I was pretty sure it would lead to disaster.

People tended to take magic-powered lanterns with them when they headed out at night, but it was the kind of countryside village that would close its stores when the sun went down anyway, so there weren't many who went out after dark in general. It was really inconvenient, but working on the same schedule as the sun is good for your health, or so they say.

I finished exchanging greetings with the doctor and then laid out a blanket on the bench closest to the wall. I was putting my lunch in the break room when Mark returned.

"Ah, I have something I'd like to talk to you about before the patients get here." I would have tapped him on the shoulder to get his attention, but he was so much taller than me that I couldn't do it casually, so I tugged on his sleeve a little instead. First, I thanked him for bringing the blankets and toys, and then I told him off for telling Dr. Daniel what he'd seen the other day, but he only looked amused.

"It's important for a doctor to know what their patients are doing, and I decided that as his assistant, it was my duty to let him know," Mark said with a smile.

"I get that, but it's embarrassing."

"Not to mention that acting up like you were could lead to it healing improperly and hurting for longer. If you understand that, you should listen to our medical advice and be a little more mature about it," he added.

"Honestly! Don't pat me on the head! I'm older than you! I'm TWENTY-EIGHT YEARS OLD!" I really wished I could emphasize how I felt with my voice rather than my face.

"You're only four years older...and if you start acting like it, I will treat you as such, Miss."

Aah, what a nice smile. Even Dr. Daniel is laughing. Whenever I tried to get something across, I ended up using exaggerated gestures, and I guess that did look kind of childish. *Maybe it just can't be helped.*

But regardless, I was so frustrated that I took Mark's lunch hostage and made him promise to speak with me later in the back garden.

"The doctor said you liked them, so I made some pancakes, with ricotta and poppy seeds, as well as a side salad with roast chicken. How about that? This should stop any unwanted tattle-telling in the future. I

hope.”

Ding-a-ling!

As I was busy with that, the doorbell rang and in came a patient.

I headed back out into the waiting room and was greeted by Mrs. Anna, who looked very pale. She had a baby on her left hip and was also holding the hand of a small girl, who looked no older than three.

I had recently spoken with Mrs. Anna, the young wife of the general store owner, at the women’s meeting. She didn’t seem to be doing too well now, so I hurried over and took the baby and showed her to a seat in the waiting room.

“Ah, the diapers...are in here...” Mrs. Anna said, clearly exhausted.

I took the bag from her shoulder and gave her a minute to catch her breath. Mark then put a hand on the drowsy-looking Mrs. Anna’s arm and led her to the examination room. The baby was fast asleep, but I wondered about the young girl. *Is she okay with her mother leaving her here?* I looked at her and could see that she was feeling a little uneasy, so I smiled and took her hand, showing her over to the blanket I’d laid down.

The girl was Mariella. She had golden blond curls and sat quietly on the bench as she looked around the room. I’d heard she was a chatterbox and quite mature for her age, but she seemed really worried about her mother’s condition. Even so, when I took out the cloth dolls from the wooden box, her eyes lit up. *All right, let’s play with the dolls then.*

While I enjoyed the warmth of the small bundle still sleeping soundly on my other arm, we played with the dolls together until Mark walked in.

“We’ve finished the appointment. I’ve had her take some medicine, so I want her to rest for a while. Are you all right waiting a little longer?” Mark asked.

“Mari doesn’t wanna go home. Mari wants to play more!” Mariella protested.

Hahaha, kids. Mark smiled wryly at Mariella, who didn’t even look at him as she enthusiastically replied before he headed back into the clinic.

After that, Mrs. Mei from the food store and Mrs. Daisy from one of the farms came in, also with children in tow. Other patients

came too, since this was the village's only clinic, and it turned into a rather busy day.

Looking after one another was a fundamental part of life here in the village. Even if you weren't living with grandparents or relatives, you could leave your children with someone you knew, and mothers could come into the clinic alone that way. However, everyone was also very aware of just how busy the other villagers were, so they would end up toughing it out and putting up with dragging their kids along with them. I wouldn't be able to come in every day, either, but I hoped I could at least help them somewhat.



THE clinic was busy all day, with various children coming and going. Other patients gave us warm looks as the children played nicely while they waited. I was actually a little too enthusiastic and even got somewhat distracted myself.

I hadn't brought a wide variety of toys. The dolls were made from leftover cloth, and I had made some simple clothes I could change them into. I had also made some small beanbags by filling fabric pouches with old beans, a small handbag big enough for a child to carry, and a variety of handkerchiefs in different colors.

It would be mostly small children and babies waiting here, so I had prepared only soft toys that were easy to play with. They could change the dolls' clothes, pile up the beanbags, and carry things around in the handbag. Even grumpy children would open their eyes wide and stop crying when I started playing around with the beanbags.

Hell yeah! I'm so glad I used to play like this with my grandmother. I really wish I could sing and play games like we used to do together, but there's nothing I can do about that without a voice. I know so many games that require a voice, too.

Even picture books were regarded as prized commodities, and it seemed only rich nobles had access to them. I asked if there were any wooden building blocks, but it seemed nobody had any of those either. There was chess and backgammon, but those kinds of board games were reserved for adults.

There was no use worrying about what they didn't have. They seemed happy with what I had made, and any toys could be

enhanced by the imaginations of the children playing with them. *You can make a meal fit for a king with acorns and a few leaves. Even a simple stick can become Excalibur.*

I thought about that for a while as I looked after the children, and time flew by in our makeshift waiting room kindergarten.

Later, I was shown to the doctor's residence to make some tea for lunch, and...

"Doctor, you have a lot of books. Are these all medical books?" I asked.

"Haha, are you surprised?" the doctor responded. "A good number of them are from since Mark came here."

The sheer number of books made it hard to tell the kitchen from the living room from the library. I felt a little overwhelmed when I thought about how difficult it would be to organize them all. By the window, there were some medicinal herbs drying out, and nearby were several tools for experiments. It was clear how seriously Dr. Daniel and Mark took their work.

My eyes wandered over to a half-written essay on the table as the doctor enthusiastically explained that it was what Mark was researching. "*Oh, that's Mark's?*" Even though he lived somewhere different, he must have been spending his free time here.

"He's always been a smart kid, so his views are interesting. He studied a variety of subjects, not just medicine, so he's always coming up with different ideas," Dr. Daniel said.

That reminded me of the medicinal herbs he had given me for baths when I still had a temperature. He would always put them together for me after asking about my symptoms, and he'd mix herbal drinks for me too. *From the way Dr. Daniel is talking about it, I assume he does the same thing when it comes to healing magic.*

Mark always seemed to do his work with practiced ease, but now that I saw the condition of his books, it appeared he'd actually been working really hard to get to this point in his career.

"He's a very enthusiastic assistant," Dr. Daniel said happily, picking up Mark's essay with a fond look in his eyes.



I felt bad about leaving Lady Adelaide to eat lunch alone, but the three of us had a relaxed pancake lunch together, and I continued

helping in the clinic until about three in the afternoon.

When we found a good time to take a break from work, Mark offered to take me home, but when we opened the clinic door, Buddy was already sitting outside waiting for me.

Buddy, you're such a good boy! I'm in love!

So Mark headed back into the clinic and I headed home escorted by the clever Buddy.

The last time I'd had someone come to meet me like that was when I'd had to leave elementary school early. It was so funny I couldn't stop smiling. Every time I looked at Buddy, I gave him a pat on the head. It made me giggle, though no sound came out. Most villagers hadn't talked to me directly when they'd first encountered me, but I could feel that they had dropped their guard a little and were less apprehensive since they'd seen me playing with children in the waiting room. The village didn't have a lot of new people, so they'd simply been curious about the newcomer who seemed different from them.

No doubt when the doctor had asked me to help out, he'd known that it would help the villagers warm up to me. *He is so considerate and kind.*

It was also really fun for me. Although it had only been for a few hours, it'd been a long time since I'd been able to spend that much time with children—a long time since I'd interned as a kindergarten teacher to get work experience back in junior college.

Like I had told Dr. Daniel early on, I had first planned on becoming a kindergarten teacher, although I'd ended up working in a department store.

I had been studying early childhood education and had even received a job offer to work at a nearby private kindergarten...but right around the time I graduated, it was announced that the kindergarten would be closing. That was a shock. And apparently, neither the children attending the kindergarten nor their parents had been informed, which had caused a lot of confusion. In short, the school had been struggling financially, but they still should have said something earlier. Other kindergartens had already finished recruiting, so only part-time teacher positions were left, and everyone else who had been working at the kindergarten that had closed were also looking for work, so the newly graduated me, with no experience, suddenly had nowhere to go.

That was when I came across a sales job in my job-hunting

process, and I'd been hired as a full-time employee at a department store that I could commute to from my hometown. The decision to open a new branch had been very sudden, so they were in a hurry to find new recruits outside of the hiring season, which usually spanned from April to May in Japan.

It had been a change of direction for me, but it had also been miraculous timing to have landed a full-time position just when I had to start repaying my student loans. The initial salary had been the same as the kindergarten position, too. At first, I had felt bad about starting work at the department store and was waiting for a position at a kindergarten to open up, but before I knew it, I was being asked to transfer to the main office in Osaka after being employed for less than a year.

That wasn't normal, right? Having to transfer and move as a salesperson. Even though I had placed super high in the new customer contests. And I had even helped someone near the hotel where that contest had been held who turned out to be a retired CEO. Not that I had cared about that!

When you see an old man using a walking stick right next to you and it looks like he's about to fall over, it's only natural to help, and to give them a hand if you're both going to the same place. That was all I'd done.

And there had been so many rumors, based on nothing but that! Rumors that I was his lover or a secret child or other such nonsense. All I did was go for a cup of tea and listen to him talk about his past. Honestly.

I couldn't say no in any case, and besides, that was when my brother had started talking about marriage, so it had been decided that I would move out of our apartment so my brother and his new wife could live together as newlyweds. And that had led to eight years of working at the department store. *Then that accident happened, and now I'm here. Ah, just how far have I drifted away from my original plan? I'm just like that coconut from the famous old song, "Yashinomi."*

All that said, I had never imagined I would find my way back to working with children again by coming to a different world...
Thanks, Doc.



WHEN I returned to the mansion, Lady Adelaide was outside, seated in the rocking chair with her eyes closed. Thinking she was taking a nap, I was on my way to cover her with a blanket when I noticed a letter in her lap.

The paper seemed to be high quality, and it was sealed with a red wax seal—like something you'd see in a historical movie. It was similar to a letter the doctor had received that morning. The seal was broken, so she must have already read it. It was going to fall off of her lap if I just left it how it was, but I was worried about what people might think if they saw me touching someone else's letter. I stood there hesitating for a while, when Buddy licked Lady Adelaide's hand, waking her up.

"Oh, welcome home..." she said. "I must have fallen asleep."

Huh? My heart filled with unease. *She seems a little down.* It was a comfortably warm sunny day out, but the wind was blowing, so I wondered if she could be cold. She did look pretty pale.

Anyone could tell that I was visibly shaken. I kneeled near the rocking chair, and as I reached out to touch Lady Adelaide's pale cheek with my finger, she kindly stroked me on the head.

"Ah...you're worried about me. It's all right. I'm just a little tired. So, shall we start preparations for dinner?" she asked.

I asked her to rest in bed, but she wouldn't listen. She opted to sit at the kitchen table instead, saying it was good enough for her to be sitting, while I prepared dinner on my own. Buddy seemed worried too, and he stayed close to Lady Adelaide's side.

I handed her some hot tea with honey as I told her that Dr. Daniel would be visiting tonight. Some of the color returned to her face.

Doctor, hurry up already!

We ate dinner like always, and as I was telling her about my day at the clinic, the man we were waiting for arrived. I showed Dr. Daniel to the living room where Lady Adelaide was waiting, served them some tea, and returned to the kitchen alone.

She said she was a little tired, but I don't think that's it. The letter. That's gotta be the source of her despondence.

During the whole time she had been looking after me, there had never once been any letters or visitors other than the villagers. She never heard from her son, who lived in the capital, either. And yet, she had now received a letter.

Regardless of what was in that letter, if it was something

against Lady Adelaide's will, I would do everything I could to protect her. As I was making that vow to myself, looking out at the starlit sky through the window, Buddy came to get me.

Dr. Daniel asked me to sit down, then handed me the letter. "You can read it," he said. "It's about you, after all."

I was a little hesitant, but he calmly told me to open it, so I unfolded the exquisite paper and began to read. *Ahh, someone from the capital will be coming to visit the Spirit Caller.*

Since my wounds hadn't fully healed yet, I still couldn't safely make the trip to the capital. So instead, someone would be coming to me. I felt fine, but Dr. Daniel wouldn't give me permission to take a lengthy ride in a carriage.

On the letter, there was a date, followed by the names of the two visitors. Hugh Tausend from the Magic Academy, and from the Royal Capital, the Prime Minister's aide...Walter Dustin. *Dustin?*

"That's my son," Lady Adelaide said, chuckling sadly.

Startled, I looked up.

"I haven't seen him in a long time. You're aware that we don't exchange letters, right?" Lady Adelaide asked.

I nodded.

"About ten years ago, I used to live with my son and his wife in the Royal Capital. I never got used to life in the city. I moved here, and my son split up with his wife after that...and they said it was my fault."

"Why? Surely their divorce was their problem, not yours."

"It seems people were saying they had thrown me out, among other thoughtless rumors. Me deciding to leave on my own was twisted into accusations that both of them had done something wrong. As a result, things got tense between them... The rumors never reached us here, so I had no idea. I had been keeping my distance from them."

With a sad look, Lady Adelaide rested her chin in her hand.

"I have no idea how to face him... I'm sorry, Margaret. This has absolutely nothing to do with you."

"Walter isn't a bad kid, but he can be stubborn," Dr. Daniel said. "This is an official thing, so you won't have to do anything. But there are no inns in this village."

Oh wow, that must mean he's gonna stay here. That makes sense, I guess. This is his family home and there are plenty of spare bedrooms. They had probably even taken that into account when deciding who

to send.

The doctor had said Walter wasn't a "bad kid." *How old must he be? Thirty-five? That's the same age as my older brother... A bad kid. Hah. Honestly, causing your mother this kind of heartache at that age does make you a bad kid. Yeah. I've decided he's a bad kid.*

"Hugh is also from here, but he doesn't have a place to stay, so they'll both probably end up staying here... What's up, Margaret?" Dr. Daniel asked.

"Oh no, I need to clean up! I haven't been keeping up with the spare rooms at all! When are they coming? In half a month's time, okay. Ah, what about meals? Do they have any preferences? Since they're guests, should we prepare something special for them? I need to trim the grass by the entrance, but when the weather's good like this, it just ends up growing back. Even if we're acting totally normal, that's the least we can do." I rambled off as best I could with gestures and writing on their palms.

"The sheets have been in storage, so I'll need to give them a wash. If we didn't have Patty and Ted coming twice a week to help, there's no way we would have enough people. We should order a lot of food...oh, ah, baths! It'll be hard to prepare a bath for both of them. They'll have to do it themselves. They're men after all, so they should be able to bring their own hot water in. If they have any complaints, they can use the lake behind the forest. Summer is on its way, so they won't catch cold. Yeah, we'll do that."

I nodded, content with my plans.

"...Addie, you don't need to worry about much, it seems," Dr. Daniel said after all of that.

"You're right... I already feel a little bit better."

Her gaze still felt somewhat tepid to me.

"It'll be all right, Lady Adelaide," I wrote into her palm. *"We'll give them a proper welcome. We'll make all their favorite things so they eat a lot."*

And if your son is still a stubborn blockhead after eating so much delicious food, then we'll just feed him some cookies that are so dry he almost chokes! We won't let him have any tea; we'll just leave his mouth all dry and dusty.

Hehe, I'm itching to put my skills to use. I'll prepare cookies covered in powdered sugar, and cookies with nuts made from all-wheat flour. I won't forgive you for making Lady Adelaide cry!

The doctor stroked my head as if to thank me before he

headed home. He was treating me like a child again, but Lady Adelaide was feeling better, so let's just say everything was all right in the end.



AS I busied myself with working at the clinic and weeding around the mansion, the month passed without much incident. The days started to get longer as we headed toward summer. I didn't know if it was because they were getting so much sun or because the soil was so good, but the blueberry bushes that were growing next to the backyard were growing faster than any of the other trees in the village.

I gathered some early-ripening tomatoes, zucchinis, and other summer fruits and vegetables as I thought about what to make for dinner. *Caponata, ratatouille, pasta... I'll ask Lady Adelaide what she wants to do.*

It was finally the day for guests to visit from the capital. In fact, they were probably already in the village.

Miselle was actually territory owned by Lady Adelaide's family, or rather by Count Dustin. It made sense when I thought about it. Nobles were generally landowners. In my old world, a person could hold a court title without owning any land, but here, nobles really did own land. I guess in Japanese terms, that would make them *daimyo*....not that I was entirely sure; I didn't have a lot of noble friends.

When Lady Adelaide's husband had passed away, Lord Walter had become the new count by succession, so he was a landowner. *I'll still call him "Lord," even though he's a bad kid. I'm a grown adult, after all. Manners and lip service are important. Hehe.*

Counts were usually in possession of multiple territories, and since the population and size of this village were both quite small, it seemed that Miselle had been left to the village head. So, when they'd heard that the count would be coming to visit, the village head got busy completing tasks around the village, and upon hearing that the visitors would be coming to see me specifically, the head had decided that both of them would stay at the mansion. I had heard they would arrive by evening.

I decided to expertly ignore the fact they had chosen to go to

the village head before the Spirit Caller. After all, they didn't have a lot to talk about with me...well, they did. Mostly related to money.

I was under the care of Lady Adelaide, but the country wanted me to receive aid. Or rather, they had apparently already been paying me—I was just none the wiser. Dr. Daniel reluctantly informed me of this when he returned from the Royal Capital.

So, what did that mean? The count was the owner of the village, but the mansion and the land surrounding it belonged to Lady Adelaide. Lady Adelaide didn't live off the count's money, but rather off her own trust fund. I had come tumbling into her life out of nowhere, but it was part of the government's role to financially support a Spirit Caller, arrange a place for them to live, help with any living expenses, and so on, all with money from the national treasury.

On the face of things, it had looked like I was being helped by Lady Adelaide, when in fact I was living on the nation's taxes.

I had come flying in here with nowhere to live and no job, so naturally I was grateful for the help. However, as someone who had always worked to provide for herself, I kind of...how should I put this... I felt kind of bad, in all honesty. *When I'm completely recovered and can work again, I want to cancel the support money.*

I may have technically been a Spirit Caller, but it didn't feel like I was doing anything worth paying me for. Receiving money for nothing didn't sit right with me.

So that was why I wanted to hurry up and recover, so I could help with housework, at the clinic, and with other work. I also wanted to talk to our two guests about that.

I looked up at the sun, which was now up high in the sky, from under the rim of my straw hat. The sky got bluer with each passing day, and the sun's rays made me feel like summer was close, but the wind was still cool and comfortable. It was the perfect weather for wearing long-sleeved clothing if you didn't move around too much.

I was in an unknown place. An unknown atmosphere. But it was the same sky I had always known. The same wind I had always known.

As I continued gazing up at the sky, Buddy suddenly trotted over and tugged at my skirt. It seemed he had been in the forest and had brought back several fairies, who were sitting on his back and tail. *There are a lot today. One, two...seven of them.* They were

nudging their heads together with sparkling eyes, urging me to give them pets.

Aaah, so cute!

I cheerfully left the field, placing my basket filled with vegetables on the table. With both hands free, I squatted down and gave Buddy some hearty rubs. The fairies seemed to be in a good mood today—they flew over and sat on my shoulders and along the brim of my hat.

Ah, now, now, don't go inside my clothes. Hyah! That tickles! That's my neck, ack, Buddy help! Before I knew it, my hat had gone flying off and I'd fallen over, right on my butt. *Aaah, this is too much.*

"Oh, that's my first time seeing them. Are those Fairy Lights? Ah, they already left... Walter, did you see them too?"

"...Yeah."

Who are they?

I've never seen them before...and that must mean they're today's guests! Aren't they a bit early? They were supposed to come in the evening, and it's only just past lunchtime. Also, why did they suddenly appear in the back garden? Also, don't just stand behind me like that while I'm sitting here on the ground! My clothes are all messed up right now!

"Ah, sorry, Miss Spirit Caller. We gave you a shock, huh? Are you able to stand up?"

A man with soft features and long red hair offered me his hand as he spoke to me. *Yes, you did give me a shock. I'll take your hand to help me up, though.*

All right. Thank you.

Why are you staring at my hand like that? There's no dirt on it. Aah, honestly, look somewhere else already!

I indicated that I wanted the two of them to face the other way, and then I turned my back on them to pat the dirt off my clothes and fix the bodice of my dress, which the fairies had messed up. As for my hair...I couldn't do anything about that. I combed up the loose strands with my fingers and made it somewhat neater, and then I took a deep breath and signaled for Buddy to get the guests' attention again.

"Nice to meet you," said the red-haired man. "I'm Hugh Tausend from the Magic Academy. It's a pleasure to be in the presence of such beauty, Miss Spirit Caller."

Wow, he's a ladies' man, if I've ever seen one.

He held his hand before his chest and swept into an elegant bow. Since he was from the Magic Academy, that meant he was some type of magic user. He even had a black robe to match. It made me wonder if he was hiding a wand somewhere.

I smiled nonchalantly as if I hadn't just made a fool of myself, returning a bow like Lady Adelaide had taught me, which seemed to surprise them. This was the only thing she had said I was good at from the start. Although my style of bowing was different, I hadn't been bowing for eight years in a department store with nothing to show for it.



"Wow, you're full of surprises... Heh, I feel like we'll get along," said Hugh.

Why does he think that? I couldn't sense any malice in his carefree laugh. But it did make him come across as a flirt.

"Ah, hey, Walter, introduce yourself," he said to the other man.

"...I'm Walter Dustin."

Oh, he had been standing in the back, so I couldn't see him well, but he was tall! *He's so impressive! So, wait, this is Lady Adelaide's son...? Huuuuh?*

Strange. In the picture on the mantelpiece in the living room, he looked similar to Lady Adelaide, though that picture was from when he was younger. I took a step closer to him to get a better look. Other than the color of his eyes, there were no other resemblances.

He had unique eyes, brown with a slight red line toward the bottom of each iris. *I can understand why he finds me suspicious, but there's no need to glare like that. When you do that, I can't believe your eyes are the same color as Lady Adelaide's kind ones.*

He had such an authoritative presence, and it was plain to see that he was well-built under all those fancy clothes. If I hadn't known he was the prime minister's assistant, I would have assumed he was in the military or police force.

I felt a little uncomfortable with his penetrating gaze, so I put on my best customer service smile and gestured for his hand. He suspiciously and reluctantly gave it to me. As I had suspected, it matched his body.

Are these callouses from holding a sword? You don't get those kinds of callouses from holding a pen, so he must be in the military. In any case, these certainly aren't the hands of an ordinary government official.

What do you do as an assistant to the prime minister? Hand-to-hand combat?

As I wrote a question on his palm, instead of responding, he started to frown. I just smiled back at him. *Hehe, please don't underestimate my customer service abilities. Just how do you think I've been dealing with difficult customers all these years? My "anytime, anywhere, anyone" customer service smile is still alive and well.*

I picked up my hat and my vegetables and motioned to Buddy

that we should head back.

“What’s going on? What’s up?” Hugh asked.

“...Shut up,” Walter replied.

“There you go, acting all high and mighty again. Hey, Miss, what did you write?” Hugh asked me.

I had only confirmed something by writing, “*Do you like cookies?*”



“**WELCOME** home, Margaret,” Lady Adelaide said. “Did you manage to get some vegetables?”

I knocked three times on the back door, as I always do, as I entered. Lady Adelaide responded without taking her eyes or hands off the bread dough she was kneading.

I approached her to show her the vegetables I had gathered, and as I gave her my usual “I’m home” kiss on the cheek, she lifted her head up, her eyes widening as she noticed the guests.

“Forgive us for intruding so suddenly. I’m Hugh Tausend, from the Magic Academy,” Hugh said by way of introduction. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Adelaide Dustin. Apologies that I’m dressed like this...but welcome. Walter.”

“...Long time no see.”

What was that? That monotone greeting was even worse than when he had introduced himself to me. Hugh came over to me as I was putting away the vegetables and shrugged his shoulders with a sigh. He seemed like the playboy type, but that was a normal reaction... Then again, he *was* standing a bit close. We were practically shoulder to shoulder, making it hard to move around without bumping into him.

I looked up to signal that I wanted him to move away a little. He was looking down at me with a smile in his green eyes, which were the same color as emeralds. It was my first time seeing something so beautiful. I remembered hearing that green eyes were quite rare, even more so than blue eyes.

“...Miss, staring at me like that while you’re standing so close is naturally going to make a man blush,” Hugh teased.

Oh, my apologies. I ended up looking at you like this because you

were ignoring the concept of personal space. Apparently, even though you like to look at people yourself, you get shy when they look back.

"That reminds me, the report mentioned that your eyesight isn't that good," Hugh continued. "So, were you able to get a good look just now?"

"Oh, your eyes are so pretty I actually wanted to look at them a little more," I wrote, getting a little closer just to mess with him. *I mean, why are you getting so flustered now? You talk so smooth, then get that embarrassed? Your actions don't match your words. Are you actually innocent despite your choice of words?*

"By the way, I heard you wouldn't be arriving here until evening," Lady Adelaide interjected. "But...has there been a problem...?"

"Ah, no, not at all. We just thought we would come and greet you first. We'll leave our things here, then go see the village head," Hugh explained. "Right, Walter?"

"...You just went ahead and decided that yourself. I don't care," Walter said gruffly.

Ah, that's the longest sentence we've gotten from him today.

They went to get their belongings from the front garden, and I showed them to their rooms on the second floor.

"Ooh, so this is what it looks like inside," Hugh exclaimed. "It's old, but clean. It's been well cared for and seems pretty cozy!"

"That reminds me, you were born in this village, right, Hugh?" I asked.

"That's right," he said. "That's the main reason they sent me here. I moved to the Royal Capital with my family when I was around fourteen, so it's been about fifteen years, I guess. I saw some people I still recognized when I came here."

"Well, it is the countryside." I nodded.

A surprising number of my old classmates were still living in my hometown, too.

"When was the last time you were here, Walter?" Hugh asked. "Has it been since your vacation last year?"

"...No," Walter said. "I came here once or twice as a kid for about half a day each time. The last time was eight years ago."

Ah, what a waste. The forest behind the property would be great for kids to play in. But he might as well have never actually come here. This grown son of hers left Lady Adelaide all alone. Honestly...

They told me they could unpack on their own, so I headed

back to the kitchen and helped Lady Adelaide with the bread.

“Did they both go straight to the back garden when they got here?” Lady Adelaide asked.

“It was like they had appeared out of nowhere. They had totally surprised me.” I nodded to Lady Adelaide.

“I thought they’d come a bit later...but I guess this is better than wondering when they’d be getting here.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Seeing Walter again had been what she was most nervous about, after all, and now that was already over with. As a result, the sense of nervousness that had been coming from Lady Adelaide over the past few days had finally disappeared. Hopefully, the two of them would be able to talk properly later...but I had to hope that Lord Walter’s attitude toward me was just because of my status as an outsider.

“Walter is so blunt. Were you scared of him at all?” Lady Adelaide asked.

I shook my head. His serious face and frown seemed to be his default expression, but I hadn’t felt any ill will or malice, so I wasn’t afraid. In fact, I had thought he was just being threatening on purpose. Was he really like that all the time? Lady Adelaide grinned at my visible surprise.

“He actually seemed a little more relaxed than usual,” she said. “Probably because you’re here, Margaret.”

What?! That was him being relaxed?!

...W-Well, Dr. Daniel and Mark will be coming over for dinner later anyway, so things should go okay. Once I had finished rounding off the bread, Hugh and Walter left, saying that they were off to see the village head.



I covered the thickly cut eggplant and zucchini slices in olive oil and lightly fried them, then placed some similarly sliced tomato into a gratin dish, alternating between the other vegetables before sprinkling on some salt and pepper, adding cheese on top, and popping the whole thing into the oven. I had decided not to make caponata or pasta with the newly picked vegetables, instead opting for a casserole.

The mansion had a large dining room, so even with the reasonably large table and the chairs that we had taken out of storage, there was still a lot of space. We put out a tablecloth and made a centerpiece of some flowers from the garden, which created a nice atmosphere. It was exciting!

The tableware was just gorgeous. Since this wasn't the count's main property, we used thick ceramic plates instead of thin porcelain. They were decorated with seasonal flowers and a green wave with a faint watermark. The design was modest enough that you could use them without feeling guilty.

"I often have Daniel and Mark over, but it's been so long since I had any other guests," Lady Adelaide said.

Sometimes the village head would visit, and Lady Adelaide would skillfully make a variety of dishes: green beans cooked in oil and ham, shepherd's pie with a good amount of mashed potatoes, lightly seasoned onion soup, and refreshing lettuce salad. This time, she had prepared steaks for the guests, seasoning them lightly with an herb salt, but would wait to cook them until after the guests had returned so she could ask them their preferences.

I was standing at Lady Adelaide's side. Once the preparations for the steak had finished, I began cutting up different vegetables into small cubes to be used in tomorrow's ratatouille, starting with the tomatoes. Letting the vegetables rest overnight would allow the flavors to soak in for a more delicious flavor.

Apparently, when Walter was younger, he had preferred shepherd's pie, which was made with lamb, to cottage pie, which was made with beef. *That explains his body.*

When I asked Lady Adelaide about Walter's appearance, she said he looked a lot like his father, then she explained that those who wished to work in the Royal Palace first had to work as knights for a certain amount of time. Even before that, Walter had always enjoyed training his sword skills, so he had a lot of experience there despite being a civil servant now.

Cooking at Lady Adelaide's house was always fun. It was different from when I had lived alone and had a small kitchen. Here, there were several kitchen counters and two people could stand side by side and still have enough space. I kneaded dough for bread and made pie crust on a table behind one of the kitchen counters. It was just the right height, and sturdy enough for the job.

"Hey there, ladies. This looks delicious."

"You always feed us well."

Ah, Dr. Daniel and Mark are here. We had told them to let themselves in because we would be busy in the kitchen all day. That's the countryside for you. Very laidback.

I looked at the clock and realized it was still early. Dr. Daniel and Mark arriving already must have meant that the clinic wasn't very busy, which was a good thing.

"Welcome, you two. You're early," Lady Adelaide remarked.

"Everyone's gone to see the village head, so we've had it easy today," Dr. Daniel explained.

"I see, that'll be due to Lord Walter. Oh, Mark brought liquor? Thank you."

Lady Adelaide and I often made fruit alcohol ourselves, but we didn't drink enough to warrant buying it, so I had no idea about the quality of what Mark had brought.

"This isn't that strong, so you should be able to handle it, right?" Mark asked.

I already asked you to stop stroking my head... Hey, my hands are already occupied, so I can't do anything to stop you!

"But as it happens, I can handle a lot of alcohol. I spent eight years as a working adult, so I'm very good at social drinking. One could even say I can handle my alcohol extremely well."

However, since injuring myself, I had hardly ever had any booze, and the last time I did, it had been the first time in a while, so I had gotten a bit drunk... *They don't believe me, do they? Dr. Daniel is looking at me with that kind look again, like he's humoring me... I give up.*

It was getting to the point where people stroked my head so often that I was slowly getting accustomed to it—and that wasn't good. Even when I was working in the clinic, Mark would give me drive-by head-pats.

"Hey, Mark, you should give those to the children who are waiting patiently instead. I'm an adult, after all," I would tell him.

I *should* have looked my age, but for some reason, I looked a lot younger here than I really was. Whenever I protested, Mark always looked at me with a delighted look on his face, and when I saw him like that...it made me feel a certain way that I couldn't really put into words and had never expected.

"We're baaack," Hugh said. "Oh wow, that looks delicious!"

"...We have returned," mumbled Lord Walter.

While we were busy with preparations, the two from the Royal Capital had returned.

“All right, everyone, how do you like your steak?”



THE doctor and Hugh mainly led the conversation, and we had a relaxed meal together. I didn't get drunk.

“You don't have to look at me like that, Mark. I'm not drunk! It was just delicious. Besides, you only let me take small sips from a small glass.”

Walter didn't have much to say, but Lady Adelaide didn't seem too bothered by it, so sadly, he narrowly avoided death by dry cookie. In other words, his sour look was just how he was.

He did look like he wanted to say something, though, so I wondered if he was just waiting for the right time. *I wish he would just go ahead and say it, whatever it is.*

After dinner, we headed to the living room and had tea. The conversation then moved right along, onto me.

“So, what are your plans?” Dr. Daniel asked our guests.

“Hmm, well as soon as we came here, we got to see the Fairy Lights, so there's absolutely no doubt that Margaret is a Spirit Caller,” Hugh said. “Not that anyone doubted it. So, I wonder if we could gather some information, Miss?”

Hugh looked right at me as he responded to the doctor's question. *I wonder if we can do something about him calling me “Miss.” I feel like he wouldn't listen if I asked him not to, though.*

Hugh moved to sit beside me. The doctor and Lady Adelaide were seated across from us, and Mark and Walter sat in armchairs on either side of them. Hugh rustled around in his bag and then took something out of it.

“This is a magical device. It's been specially made. Once I heard you had lost your voice and were struggling, we developed this in class at the Magic Academy,” Hugh said. “It's a special pen.”

He was holding a tablet-like device around the size of a notepad. The display was milky-white and smooth as glass. He handed me a cute black quill pen to go along with it.

“Try and write something with this pen. Like, a self-introduction or something,” Hugh said.

I did as he instructed and began writing in this world's language.

"I'm Margaret," I wrote. *"Please stop calling me 'Miss.'"* After a moment, the words I had written slowly floated up into the air, then disappeared as they were absorbed back into the pen. *Wow, cool.*

"With this, you won't run out of places to write on like you would with paper. There's a crushed magic stone inside the pen, and the magic stored inside it acts as ink. I've made it so it constantly reuses the magic, so it'll work for a long time without you having to worry about ink. It will lose a little over time, though, so it's not forever," Hugh explained.

"Oh...I didn't realize that was possible," Lady Adelaide said.

"We have students with incredible stores of magical power and they're creating a variety of items. Ah, and this is a prototype model, so they've asked if you can provide any feedback on it while I'm here. How long it displays for, how heavy it is, things like that," Hugh continued with a smile. "They'll work on improving it, so if you have any input, make sure to let me know."

I nodded and wrote, *"Okay."*

"I wish we could do something about your voice, though. If the doctor examined you and didn't know what's wrong, then we certainly won't be able to figure it out. You could probably find something out from the Spirits, though. Do you wanna meet them?" Hugh asked.

"Huh, I can meet them?"

"They often appear in the Royal Capital forest," Hugh explained. "It hasn't been long since their last appearance, but it's hard to determine when they'll come back. I guess that's why you were summoned here, Miss. I can't promise when they'll next appear or when you'll get to meet them, but if you want to, I can try and put something together."

"Hmm. Okay, if I get the chance, I'd like to meet them," I wrote with the black quill pen.

"...You don't want to meet with them right away?"

Oh, Lord Walter... Wait, everyone is... Huh, whaaat, why is everyone looking at me like they're so surprised?

"Of course I would love to meet with the spirits," I wrote. *"Especially since they're the ones who brought me here. But that doesn't mean I need to go right now. If I have to stay in the Royal Capital to*

meet them, who knows how long that'll take? I don't really wanna do that... I don't want to be away from here. I enjoy my life here with Lady Adelaide, and I feel like I can't leave this forest."

Even when they had told me I'd have to go to the Royal Palace, I had agreed to one day only. I didn't want to stay for several days. I couldn't say why for sure, so I put it down to women's intuition, which was rarely wrong, in my experience.

"...You don't want to leave here?" Lord Walter asked.

"How about you go with Addie?" the doctor suggested. "Of course, I'll come along too."

"If I'm with Dr. Daniel and Lady Adelaide, then...that won't be so bad. At least for two or three days."

"I see, all right, got it. Well, next time, eh?"

Hugh didn't pursue it any further, and instead moved on to asking a variety of other questions. Lord Walter's frown had deepened, so I assumed that half of the questions had no relation to their work.

I get it, Hugh is the type of person to put his own curiosity ahead of other things.

He didn't ask anything too troubling, so I answered what I could. I had to pass on giving more detailed answers to the questions about energy storage laws and genetics. All I could say was that I had no reason to think it was any different from my old world. He also asked me about the homemade cosmetics and toys I had made.

My hand hurts from writing so much.

We did make one discovery, however. It seemed the days differed in length between my world and this world. I said "seemed" because my watch was broken, and it didn't properly measure the length of a second. Since living in the countryside, I had barely paid much attention to the calendar, but the number of days in a year was different.

Aah, most people would probably have worried about that sooner. This was why people had called me disorganized before. Back at my sales job, I had no sense of the days, and I would just count the time in twenty-four-hour intervals. I thought of it all as the same.

So, by doing some rough estimates, I would be roughly twenty-six in this world. Yeah. That's not that much of a difference. Huh, hold on, Mark, what do you mean by "I thought so?"

"She didn't look four years older than me, did she, doctor?"

Mark asked.

"Even then, she still looks younger. Around twenty-two, twenty-three?" Hugh guessed.

"Twenty-two, Hugh? There's no way."

Mark seemed so happy to learn that our four-year age gap was actually only a two-year age gap. *Don't come over to pat me on the head. And what's the doctor laughing about, anyway?*

"It doesn't matter if I'm twenty-eight or twenty-six! It still rounds up to thirty either way, so I'm still a fully grown woman. Capisce?"

Hugh laughed as he looked at me, then sharpened his gaze. "Now, for the main event."

His clear emerald eyes suddenly turned into the eyes of a researcher. As I let out a silent sigh at his uncharacteristically serious look, he clapped his hands over my cheeks and looked at me closely.

"Margaret. Can I examine your eyes?"

Mark, who was still standing next to me, interrupted and removed Hugh's hands.

The magical device fell off of my lap, and before I could even think about what was happening, my head was being cradled so I couldn't see or hear, and I could feel something wrap around me.

Huh? Why is Mark hugging me? He's so close I can hear his heartbeat... Ah, what a bother! Why do I feel so relaxed in his arms? I'm getting too used to this.

"...Tausend. If you're going to use Investigative Magic on someone, you need to get their consent first."

I was so close to Mark's chest that I could tell he was making absolutely no attempt to conceal his disapproval from the low rumble in his throat.

"I haven't even cast anything yet. Look, I didn't use any mana. I was just about to explain it to her. I guess I was a little too close..." Hugh admitted. "You're so close-minded. Or rather, loyal."

"Hugh, don't go about it like that," Lord Walter warned.

Investi...Investigative Magic? I couldn't really hear much with Mark still hugging my head to his chest, but I could still detect Lord Walter's disappointment. I guessed that Hugh had just done something wrong.

"Hugh, please explain," the doctor said.

"Yes, of course," Hugh said. "Hey, Mark, let go of the young lady, or she won't be able to hear."

With encouragement from the doctor, Mark finally let me go. Without releasing his hand from my shoulder, he put his other hand on my cheek and gazed deeply into my eyes.

“You’re not hurt anywhere...right?”

No, I’m absolutely fine.

His hand on my cheek was large and strong. I hadn’t been able to feel it that well whenever he patted me on the head, but they were definitely a man’s hands, and they were completely different from how Hugh’s hands had felt before— *Wait, what am I thinking about? Isn’t this a little awkward?*

I nodded several times to show that I was okay, and then Mark hurriedly took his hand back and picked up the magical device that had fallen near my feet. *Ah, thankfully it doesn’t seem to be broken. All right, deep breaths. Calm down. Okay.*

“It’s all right! I’m not gonna do anything. This is nothing compared to the Magic Academy, so you can trust I’m in total control. You can remove the Magical Barrier from the young lady, Mark,” Hugh said.

Magical Barrier? When did he do that? I had no idea what was going on, and Hugh must have noticed my confusion, so he began to explain.

“He put it on you when he moved me away. He’s quite skilled, a lot better than most. Hey, Mark, why don’t you quit working at the clinic and come to the Magic Academy?”

“No thanks,” Mark replied.

“Huh, you didn’t miss a beat with that response.”

Mark shifted his gaze from Hugh, who was smiling wryly, over to Lord Walter, who sighed as he stood up and then sat down beside Hugh.

“Hey, Walter, why are you sitting here? It’s not like you need to pin my arms down,” Hugh commented.

“Is this better?” Lord Walter asked, looking at Mark.

Mark gave it some thought then nodded. As he did so, I felt as if a forcefield around me had suddenly dissipated with a *pop*.

Ah, that’s why I felt like I was wrapped up in something earlier. That was the barrier.

Mark moved onto the opposite sofa, where Dr. Daniel and Lady Adelaide were sitting. He leaned back and folded his arms.

“Hugh. Your explanation,” he said.

“All right,” Hugh began. “So, Investigative Magic is the ability

to investigate things that cannot be seen... For example, I mentioned at dinner that my eyes are special, right?"

"Yeah, I heard."

An average person was able to sense magic, but Hugh was actually able to see it with his eyes. That didn't mean he could see it all the time; he could only see it when he intentionally used that ability. But it was still something special. Anyway, it seemed the only people capable of that in this country were Hugh and the head of the Magic Academy, so as he had said himself, he was quite skilled. Even Lord Walter had to admit that the head of the Magic Academy and Hugh were both outliers in that regard.

The reason he was still doing secretarial work and wasn't part of the upper echelons of society could have been that he didn't want it, or it could have been a result of the fact that he had been born a commoner. Though he did say that if he were promoted, he would have to do more work and would have less time for his own research, at which point Dr. Daniel smiled knowingly.

"Yeah, I get it. Life is about more than just climbing the corporate ladder."

Hugh nodded and then said something surprising.

"When I arrived at the mansion today, I could see an unbelievable stream of magic, the source of which was the forest. When I got closer, I could see it was flowing out from you, Miss. While you were outside, there was a huge surge of magic pouring through the forest."

"Huh, what...magic? It was coming from me?"

"So that's what you were so curious about this afternoon," Lord Walter said.

"Yeah. Ah, but it makes sense that you didn't sense it, Walter. The frequency was different from the magic of a human or animal, so you wouldn't usually feel it. I wouldn't have noticed if it weren't for my eyes," Hugh said. "It was my first time seeing that kind of magical power."

When Mark had put the barrier on me, it had felt like something had been draped over me, and it had taken less than a second for him to apply and remove it. While I was outside... Actually, now that I thought about it, I did generally feel better in the back garden and on the veranda.

Whenever my left leg was hurting, or I had a temperature, going outside to feel the breeze usually helped me calm down. I had

thought it was just because it was nicer outside and there was such a comfortable atmosphere there, but...had I been wrong all along?

"And," Hugh continued, "as far as I can tell, the young lady here has no normal magical ability, and no magical residue from the forest. However, in her paler eye, I can sense the slightest bit of magic. Only very slight, though."

"B-But aren't Spirit Callers supposed to have no magic ability?" Lady Adelaide asked, startled.

Hugh nodded in response. "That's right. As you reported, she received magical treatment from the doctor, and even though there was so much magic oozing out of the forest, there's no trace of either type of magic within her. I guess it can't be stored when it isn't being used directly. But there is something in that left eye of hers. I'm certain it's different from what we know of as 'magic,' but I don't know what it is, so I do want to investigate it further."

"A different kind of magic...," Lord Walter said. He also seemed surprised.

"If that's the case," the doctor said, "then it does require some investigation. Hugh, you said it was on a different wavelength from the magic in the forest. Does that mean it's the same as the Spirit Power in the Royal Capital Forest?"

"I've never been in contact with a Spirit's magical power, so I wouldn't be able to say for sure. That's why I would first like to confirm whether the magic within her eye is related to the magic coming from the forest. Once we figure that out, we can then come up with some hypothesis," Hugh responded. "According to the report, the young lady had some very grievous wounds, yet they healed so quickly. No matter how good the doctor's magic is, that recovery speed is extraordinary."

Oh, I didn't know that. I just thought it was because magic was so powerful. I looked at the doctor.

"I thought so, too. But nothing else strange happened, so I chalked it up to being a Spirit Caller trait. Also, her healing rate has slowed since then," Dr. Daniel said.

"Yeah, that was a reasonable assumption to make. However, because Margaret is a Spirit Caller, I believe she does have some connection to the Spirits. Maybe the Spirits are using the forest to send magic and heal her wounds. Since her leg and foot were the most wounded, I wonder if the Spirits specifically protected her head, or maybe healed that first. Also, you mentioned that you

didn't want to be away from here for a long time, right?" Hugh said, looking at me. "I think you've realized deep down that if you leave, you'll stop healing, and that's why you want to stay."

His explanation made a lot of sense. I could see where he was coming from. *See, Hugh, you're capable of having a serious conversation.*

"Are you unable to determine if it's the same magic without doing a full investigation?" Mark asked with a glum look. He didn't seem too keen on letting them use Investigative Magic.

I wonder if there's a downside to using it.

"Sadly, it's hidden deep within her eye. Even though I can detect the magic's existence, I can't know what it is just from looking at it," Hugh replied.

"...I can also use Investigative Magic," Mark chimed in.

"But Hugh is the only one who can see the magic coming from the forest. We wouldn't be able to compare the two if we tried," Dr. Daniel said.

Mark still looked uneasy, even though the doctor's reasoning made sense.

"Hey, you've been worried about this for a while now. Is it that dangerous?"

The doctor peeked at what I wrote and patted me on the head as he responded. "No, it's not dangerous. However, it does mean he'll get close to your mind. In some cases, he might even see deep into the recesses of your psyche, which I guess isn't very comfortable. People who don't like it, really don't like it," he told me as he calmly looked me in the eye.

"That's why we limit it to the area we wish to investigate, and make no attempt to go any further than that," Hugh explained. "If you're worried, Walter can act as a Spotter. You helped me during an exam at the academy and were quite good, I remember," he said to Walter.

"I see. So, you'll go deep into my psyche and mind. Ah, what about memories? Is that different?"

"You use a different magic for memories, and even feelings. Also, since it's just a surface-level investigation, it won't put your body under that much stress. There aren't any side effects or anything," Hugh said. "Honestly, it's like a small, noninvasive surgery. It won't take that long, and all you have to do is hold my hand and look into my eyes."

Hold hands and make eye contact. Ah, yeah, it seems skin-to-skin contact is needed. I glanced at Dr. Daniel, who nodded reassuringly.

"If the doctor says it's okay, it should be fine. All right, go ahead."

"Yay! Thanks! All right, let's begin," said Hugh.

"Relax a little." Lord Walter kept a firm look on Hugh as he partially stood up. Mark still seemed worried...or maybe just restless.

They said it would have no effect on my body, and because there was something they needed to investigate, I figured it would be fine. Even though the doctor had tried to persuade him, Mark still seemed worried.

"It has to be done, Mark," Dr. Daniel said.

"I know," Mark replied.

I moved to the armchair as Hugh knelt before me and reached out to hold my hands...or rather, to hold my wrists. Lord Walter placed a hand on each of our shoulders as I was instructed to look directly into Hugh's eyes.

He had a serious look in his eyes, but they were such a clear emerald color, and as I was fixated on them, I felt something around my brow, and then was suddenly hit with a wave of exhaustion.



What's that warmth I can feel...? I could feel heat coming from Hugh's hands on my wrists and from Walter's hand on my shoulder. It felt like warm water. Unable to resist, my eyelids naturally closed, and I fell into a comfortable half-sleep before the warmth suddenly disappeared, and I felt Hugh release my hands.

Feeling like I had woken from a dream, I opened my eyes and saw Hugh collapsed on the floor. *Huh?*

"It's done," Lord Walter declared with finality.

According to the doctor, it had taken around two or three minutes, but it had felt like no more than seconds. I felt fine, but Hugh...

As he lay on the ground, I wondered if he had been negatively affected by what he'd done.

"He was probably hit by some magic," Mark explained. "It happens sometimes, so it's all right, he'll come around soon. He's usually the one who's *using* magic, so I guess he wasn't used to being hit by it. Just deserts for touching you like that..."

Magical forces could interrupt or even repel one another. Since I had no magical power myself, I didn't feel anything, but apparently, it didn't feel great if you were hit with strong magic. For that reason, people with a lot of magical energy usually tried to keep it under control so they wouldn't hurt other people, or they would do something like what Mark did and use a Magical Barrier. However, it seemed Investigative Magic lowered defenses in that regard.

However, that did mean the "something" in my eye was indeed magic—and enough to affect even Hugh, who had more magic than normal himself...

"Hugh. Get up," Lord Walter said, tapping Hugh on the cheek.

"Mm..." Hugh murmured as he woke up. His cheeks were flushed, but his eyes were sparkling with joy. "Y-Yup! Just as I thought, it's the same! It's the same as the magic from the forest!"

He seems so happy. He grabbed both of my hands again and began shaking them up and down.

"And I found something else out! That eye of yours is linked with the Spirit in the Royal Capital. When I followed its traces, I ended up at the same place where the Spirit is. That's why I got hit with magic. Thanks to that, I was able to work out that the magic in the forest and the Spirit's magic is the same!"

“So does that mean that the Royal Capital Spirit’s magic and the magic coming from this forest are the same as the magic hidden in Margaret’s eye?” Lord Walter asked.

“Yeah, Walter, you could say that,” Hugh confirmed. “Through the Spirit’s vision, I could actually see our boss... I can’t believe he’s in that forest again.”

Okay, I can understand the magic power being the same, but what was that? My eye is linked? Is that a thing? Nothing has changed with my vision, and it doesn’t feel like I’m sharing my vision with anyone. I wonder if it’s just similar or something and that’s all.

I checked my vision by covering each eye with one hand in turn.

“That’s just my guess, though,” Hugh said. “Just conjecture. I wonder if by putting some magic in Margaret’s eye, it can be used as a kind of guide to channel the magic. Like a medium.”

“Oh, I see. Hey, I wonder when it’ll go back to normal. I’m still not used to my new eye color. It still scares me when I look in the mirror.”

Hugh tilted his head as he read what I wrote.

“Hmm, I wonder if it’ll change back once you’re completely healed and there’s no need to keep channeling magic into you. Who knows, though? It might be there for other reasons, so maybe it’s permanent. There’s no way of knowing for sure at this point,” Hugh said. “I’ll ask our boss if he’s heard anything new from the Spirits when I head back. Thanks, Margaret! I got to see something awesome!” He cheerfully grabbed my hands again.

Thank you! We learned a lot too. I wonder if I can have my hands back... I thought as I tried to remove my hands from his grip, but he instead grabbed them extra hard and then kissed me...*huh?*

“Hey!” Mark shouted.

“...That’s too far,” Lord Walter commented.

When I came back to my senses, I saw Lord Walter looking shocked, a hand covering his mouth, and Hugh, who had been dragged back by Mark with such force that he was sprawled out on the floor again.



THAT very same Hugh was now cramming my *special* cookies into his mouth and vigorously choking on them.

“Are those what you were talking about before...?” mumbled Lord Walter as he watched Hugh crouch on the floor with tears in his eyes and cookies in his hands.

“Yeah, I made them for you. I’m glad they didn’t go to waste.”

In fact, it wasn’t that odd for close friends in this world to greet one another with kisses or hugs. However, I had only just met Hugh today, and he had kissed me right on the lips, in front of an audience, without consent—that was three strikes right there. It wasn’t even like there had been any mistletoe around. Mark had disapprovingly made sure to wipe my mouth clean afterward.

Well, anyway, Mark and Lord Walter were worried about having Hugh stay here while he was still so excited, so it was decided he would stay at the clinic with Dr. Daniel, which was where Mark said he was going to stay too.

I don’t think you have to go stand guard, though.

“Pheeew, haah, I-I thought I was a goner... Miss, you take no prisoners, huh? *Cough!*”

“Oh, you’re alive. They’re slightly dusty, but they taste good, right? Help yourself to more, there’s still some left.”

“Ah, no, thank you!” Hugh responded politely. “I’ve had my fill.”

“Hey, are you able to stand up?” the doctor said. “It’s gotten quite late. Addie, Margaret, I’ll take my leave now.”

Mark reminded me to let them know if I felt anything strange during the night. Then he reluctantly stood up, and the three of them left together.

The house felt surprisingly quiet after the liveliest guest had left. Lady Adelaide and Lord Walter looked at each other out of the corners of their eyes.

“...Shall we get to bed too?” Lady Adelaide said with a sigh. “You’re both no doubt tired. We’ll clean up tomorrow.”

I think you’re the most exhausted one here.

I nodded in agreement and gave her a goodnight kiss on the cheek, then watched her head to bed. *I’m sorry for keeping you up later than usual and causing such a ruckus.*

I bid Lord Walter goodnight and...didn’t go to my bedroom. I went to the kitchen instead. *I need a breather before I can sleep.*

I turned on a nearby lamp, poured some water into a kettle, and turned the heat on. Then I quietly cleaned a teapot and cup. As I stood there in the darkness watching the water boil, I thought

back to what had happened earlier.

Magic from the woods. My eye. This body... I had thought I was the same as the people in this world except for my lack of magic, but now I had to admit that wasn't the case. There were records in books of Spirit Callers who had been here before, but I wondered if the people around them had been uneasy or if they had felt burdened by them. I couldn't get Lady Adelaide's worried expression out of my head. *I wonder if me being here is—*

“...It's boiling.”

A voice from the direction of the doorway into the kitchen brought me back to my senses. *Oh, the kettle is whistling.* It had been boiling for so long that about a third of the water had already evaporated. Just how spaced out had I been? All I could do was laugh.

I thought Lord Walter had gone to sleep, but he had come back down for a drink of water. I took out two teacups and held them in the air to show them to him. His frown deepened as he accepted.

It was already late at night, and since we had been drinking black tea earlier, I decided to serve herbal tea. *I guess we should have some chamomile tea. It has relaxing properties and helps you sleep.* Some people aren't fond of it, though, so I showed him the tea leaves first. He said it was fine, so I handed him a steaming cup of tea, along with some honey so he could sweeten it himself.

“...How nostalgic,” he said. “I remember drinking this as a child.”

Lady Adelaide had probably made it for him; children can drink chamomile tea, too.

Making this tea had been one of my first chores. Back when I couldn't walk a lot or carry anything too heavy, I had asked Lady Adelaide if there was anything I could do. She had looked reluctant, but eventually asked me to go cut some of the chamomile outside. I had trimmed and dried the flowers for chamomile tea.

That reminded me of when Mark had started doing my house calls instead of Dr. Daniel, who had gone to the Royal Capital. Mark had been so standoffish at first, and then one day, he had started patting me on the head... I wondered if we had talked about something special, but I couldn't remember.

I squeezed myself into a seat at the table and blew on my tea to cool it. It was quiet tonight, and there were no other noises apart from the occasional sound of a pen running across a magical device.

I took a gulp of tea and then a deep breath. As I started to write what I wanted to ask, Lord Walter's eyes moved to the magical device. *How should I write this?* My hand moved as I wondered.

"You were worried, right?" I wrote. "A complete stranger, a Spirit Caller, just suddenly stumbles into your mother's home. I didn't choose to come here, but I want to stay here. Plus, I only just learned today that I'm not even a normal person. I don't know what kind of trouble that will bring. I'll probably become a burden to Lady Adelaide, who just wants to live peacefully. I wonder if it would be best for me to leave."

Callers were dangerous, and even the country's government wanted to keep me under control. That much I knew.

"I'm sorry. I really love her, and I don't want to leave. It's not just that I don't want to leave the forest, but I want to stay here with Lady Adelaide, too. Even if it's just a little longer..."

"Margaret, you've got it wrong." Lord Walter's frown had deepened as he'd watched my hand spell out my thoughts.

I knew he wasn't mad.

"My mother seems to enjoy being with you," he said. "I can tell just from looking at her that she doesn't see you as a burden. Don't worry about it—just continue as you are. Forever, in fact."

I was shocked. I had thought he would be more against this arrangement...I had no idea he'd be so open to it, and even encouraging. Lord Walter looked me directly in the eye as he continued.

"There's no need to worry about things that haven't happened. Hugh and I were dispatched here to avoid any of the trouble you're talking about. As for the magic from the forest, we can't really say anything definite about what we only learned today but, in my opinion, I don't think you're the type to do anything to hurt those around you. That much was obvious from Dr. Daniel's report alone."

O-Okay. I feel...a little relieved.

So your reason for coming wasn't only to see if I was the real thing and to investigate me. I still feel like I'm being treated like something precious, and that makes me uneasy. Well, not because I'm me, but because I'm a Caller. Even then, I wonder if it's all right for me to stay here.

As if he had heard my feelings, Lord Walter continued talking. "Plus...I guess I haven't been the best son. So, thank you for being

with her.”

Oh, so he's aware of his failings. I'm surprised, I didn't expect him to acknowledge it. But it's not something I can do in his place. After all, Lord Walter is her only son.

“Lady Adelaide would be so overjoyed if you got closer to her. Since you brought it up yourself, surely deep down you want to do so.” As I wrote that, Lord Walter turned his gaze away from me and laughed...wait, he laughed?

“As shameful as it is,” he said, “my relationship with my mother has deteriorated to the point where I wouldn't even know how to begin. It's my fault, but I have no idea how to talk to her... What's up, do I have something on my face?”

“I thought you didn't look like her, but you really are her son.” I reached out my hand to confirm by touching the side of his face.

He was clearly shocked, but there was no sense of alarm in his eyes. He reminded me of my older brother.

Always going at his own pace and highly independent. Since we had an age gap, he had never played with me or spoiled me... but he went to his own lengths for me.

My brother had no doubt had a job he'd wanted to do more, but he had gone back to our hometown to work to support me because I was still in middle school. Every time I'd acted stubborn, he would complain, but he always gave in. Even when I said I'd run away, or when I complained about work, he was always my big brother.

Lord Walter's reddish-brown eyes looked down as he laughed.

“Now, if only you could do that more often.”

Interlude: Walter Dustin

WAS she always this small?

I had just met with my mother for the first time in years, and she was smaller than I remembered, or maybe thinner.

It had been ten years since my mother, unable to adjust to life in the capital, had escaped back to the more familiar territory where she had once lived. The last time I had seen her had been eight years ago, and only for a brief moment. It had also been around a year since I had stopped sending cards, which we would often send two or three times a year until then.

I knew why she had distanced herself, and time had passed as I tried to figure out a better way of going about it. So it wasn't that strange when I received a letter, not from my mother, but from the doctor, sent to my boss.

"This arrived yesterday," my boss—the prime minister—had said, as he'd handed me a letter from Dr. Reynolds, who had previously worked in the Royal Palace as head doctor.

A Spirit Caller had appeared...in the back garden of my mother's home.

She had grievous, near-fatal wounds, but the doctor had managed to save her life, and she was now receiving care at my mother's house. The doctor closed the letter by saying that more details would follow, and that he would explain during a future visit to the Royal Palace.

"Is this...true?" I asked.

"There's no reason for Reynolds to lie. Not to mention that it's a confirmed fact that a Spirit appeared in the Royal Capital Forest," the prime minister said.

That's true. It was difficult to believe, but it was true.

A Spirit, which rarely ever appeared on this continent, and a Spirit Caller. There had been no record of either for over two hundred years.

Spirits looked after the world. Their appearance was a blessing from the heavens. They would protect us from natural disasters and

ensure that we had bountiful harvests. If we acted recklessly and angered the Spirits, they would hide themselves away and the region would fall into disaster.

They could have fallen into the same category as myths or fairy tales, but Spirits really would appear. There were even records of a country falling to disaster several hundred years ago due to a volcano's sudden eruption. Suddenly, fire and lava had begun to spurt out of the grounds of the royal palace, and that country had been wiped off the map overnight.

Last year, a Spirit had appeared in the old ruins of the previous dynasty. The Magic Academy, which had jurisdiction over the area, had tried a variety of things to work with the Spirit or research its presence, but as expected, they were unable to do anything. Then the Spirit Caller had appeared—which was no doubt very important and required a special reception.

"This is for after Reynolds arrives, but if he says the Spirit Caller is unable to move, we'll have to send someone to the village from here. Consider working with the Magic Academy on this matter," the prime minister had said.

Dr. Reynolds had attended the meeting in the Royal Capital roughly one month after his letter had arrived. Until then, he had made brief visits to the capital and given regular reports in letters, and even now the Spirit Caller remained at my mother's.

Since Spirits were a very important issue, various heads of different departments and other higher-ups were summoned in secret. But the Spirit had appeared in the forest again, so the head of the Magic Academy wasn't in attendance.

Dr. Reynolds began to speak, following the chairman's orders.

"Spirit Caller Margaret has requested to stay at Count Dustin's widow's residence in Miselle. Considering her current state, I also recommend she stay there."

"How are her wounds?" someone inquired.

"They're mostly healed. However, as a physician, I still cannot allow her to travel by horse to the Royal Capital."

She wants to stay with my mother. When I had last met with my mother, she had rarely used magical devices. I didn't expect that to change, but I wondered if the Spirit Caller was used to that kind of lifestyle. I'd also heard she was a young woman. My ex-wife was the kind of young woman who would throw a fit if forced to live that way.

“And what’s the report from the Magic Academy? How are things with the Spirit?”

“We’re unable to discern what caused it to appear, and the times it does appear seem to vary. There are no obvious problems with language, but we have yet to secure a way to carry on a conversation with it. The head of the Magic Academy has reported that the Spirit seems to only be concerned with the Spirit Caller.”

“I see. We should try and find a time when the Spirit and the Spirit Caller can meet.”

According to Reynolds, she had her memories intact, unlike the Spirit Callers of the past, and she had lost her voice. She was able to communicate via writing, and according to the Spirit Caller herself, she was twenty-eight years old and an ordinary, single, working woman. Both her parents had passed away, and her only remaining family were her brother and sister-in-law. She had been confused at first, but seemed to have calmed down since, and from how he talked about it, I could tell that Dr. Reynolds trusted her and even had some form of paternal feelings for her.

Her wish, which my mother agreed with, was to continue to stay in Miselle. Regarding her wounds and inability to travel, it was decided that people would be dispatched from the Royal Capital to Miselle, and thus ended the meeting.

“Walter, could I have a moment of your time?”

“...I have something to attend to after this.”

As I went to leave, I was stopped by Dr. Reynolds. It seemed he had expected me to rebuff him, so he was unfazed when I did.

“Busy as always, eh?” he said. “I won’t be long. It’s regarding the investigators. I’d like you to come to Miselle as part of the investigating team.”

It didn’t seem like he expected me to respond, because that was all he said before bidding me goodbye with a pat on the back.

Daniel Reynolds. He was incredibly skilled and trustworthy both as a doctor and as a person. He had quit his job as the head physician in the Royal Palace to open a clinic in Miselle, where my mother lived, under the guise of a peaceful retirement. He often came back to the Royal Capital to treat patients he knew well, as well as to support promising young people. In fact, he had one such apprentice at his clinic in Miselle, the bastard son of a prestigious count. Although Dr. Reynolds had been asked to return to the Royal Capital many times, he always refused.

My mother had known Dr. Reynolds for such a long time that he felt more like a relative than a famous doctor. And even though he hadn't explicitly said it, I could tell that he was hoping I would rekindle my relationship with my mother, which in turn made me aware of how bad I had been at maintaining contact while also keeping my distance.

I didn't know if Dr. Reynolds had made an official request, but in any case, the prime minister decided that I would be one of the investigators to go to Miselle. He figured it would make sense for someone with a relative in Miselle to go anyway because the village didn't have any inns. I was also ordered to spend some of the vacation time I had earned to take a weeklong vacation in Miselle.

The other investigator was to be Hugh Tausend from the Magic Academy. He had technically been my junior at the regular academy, but due to his magic ability and certain unique traits, we had taken a lot of lectures together.

Many members of the Magic Academy were arrogant, but Hugh was nothing of the sort; he was easy-going and affable. He had been chosen for this job because he was also from Miselle, and because we were dealing with a Spirit Caller, he would probably be able to put his magical aptitude to use. I was, for all purposes, a glorified watchdog.



"I read the report, but I wonder what she's really like. I'm excited," Hugh said as we traveled to Miselle by cab; he had complained that he didn't like the count's horse-drawn carriage. He had been chatting away to me for a while, but it didn't seem like he was particularly interested in a response from me. He seemed perfectly satisfied for me to respond with nothing but the odd grunt.

Social etiquette didn't really matter to a skilled person from the Magic Academy. If I had been too hung up on it, we wouldn't get any work done, and besides, there weren't many people who would talk to me so casually. Most people were afraid of me because of my resemblance to my father. So really, I had no complaints.

As we approached Miselle, I ended up cutting in when Hugh suddenly asked the cab driver if we could go straight to the count's

mansion. "But we have plans to visit the village head first," I said.

"I know *you* do, but I don't have any need to see him," Hugh said. "And don't you think we'll get to see the Spirit Caller if we sneak over to the count's mansion first?"

I may have been pressured into it, but it was true that I wanted to see who this woman under my mother's care really was.

Beside a forest just outside the village stood the mansion that I felt no nostalgia for nor any connection to. We quietly left the cab a short distance from the house, and as I headed toward the back door, I was suddenly stopped in my tracks.

"Shh, be quiet, let's go around this way," Hugh whispered. "Is this the back garden...? Wow, this is my first time seeing anything like this."

Hugh's special magical ability resided in his eyes. Most people could only feel magic like it was the wind, but Hugh was able to see it. He could manipulate it too, but that seemed to be highly classified information at the Magic Academy, and only a few people were aware of it, like the academy's headmaster.

Hugh was looking curiously at the sky. As I turned my gaze toward the back garden myself, I saw a woman standing there holding a basket full of vegetables. She was also looking up at the sky.

She wore a plain dress in a summery color and a straw hat with a large rim. I recognized her clothes, and was certain they belonged to my mother. We were quite a distance away, and she had her back to us, so I couldn't see her face, but she had an air of serenity about her that matched the forest. A large gray dog came out from the forest—my mother had mentioned in a letter that she had a new dog, Buddy, I believe his name was—and they left the field together, the woman playing with the dog along the way.

"Oh!"

When I heard Hugh gasp, I followed the direction of his gaze. I was shocked.

There were small golden orbs of light flying around her. And not only that, but she also seemed to be playing with them. I had heard she had lost her voice, so as expected, I couldn't hear her saying anything, but I could tell by watching that she was playing with the balls of light. Fairy Lights—there was no doubting she was a Spirit Caller now that I had seen this. Her hat went flying off as she fell over, and my eyes were drawn to her bewitching black hair.

I suddenly realized that Hugh, unable to contain his curiosity, had begun walking toward her.

No doubt surprised by our sudden appearance, she gathered herself together and gave an impressive bow befitting of a young lady. It was so perfect I might have thought we were in the back garden of the Royal Palace as I finally got a good look at the young woman.

She had black hair, eyes that were two different colors, and pale skin that made me think of a flower blooming by a summer spring. She looked a lot younger than her apparent age. My mother's dress suited her well; it no longer looked like a particularly old item of clothing. And as far as I could see, there were no scars from her wounds, which made me wonder just how serious her wounds really had been.

So, this is a Spirit Caller...but aren't we standing a little too close? It wasn't an appropriate distance for two grown adult men meeting a woman for the first time. Especially since it wasn't like I was asking her to dance. I stood still so as not to accidentally brush up against her, but then she suddenly asked for me to give her my hand. After staring intently at it for a moment, she began to use one slender finger to spell something out...which for some reason, included the word "cookie." I struggled to understand the mind of a Spirit Caller.



I had worried about reuniting with my mother for quite some time, but it ended up being cut short and rather unfulfilling as a result, thanks to Hugh. And maybe because the Spirit Caller Margaret was there too. Although my relationship with my mother hadn't changed at all, I still felt somewhat relieved.

That said, she *was* smaller than I remembered, and her voice had gotten weaker. I could sense how much she had aged, and that made me realize how long it had been since I had last seen her. Margaret seemed more like my mother's child than I did at this point, but I knew I was the reason for that, so I had no right to feel slighted.

Margaret also seemed to be enjoying leading a life without magical devices. I could picture the Royal Capital's head chef's

puzzled expression as I watched Margaret and my mother together in the kitchen.

I could easily see that Margaret had gotten accustomed to her life here. There was nothing to suggest she was struggling to make this way of life work for her.

I was, however, getting concerned about how physically close she was standing to Hugh, which reminded me that the report had said she had weak eyesight. *I wonder if we should make some glasses for her when she comes to the Royal Capital...both to protect her and to ensure she keeps an acceptable distance from men.*

"Ah, we just got to see something interesting," Hugh commented.

"Are you referring to your bright red face?" I responded. "You're right, that was rare."

"Bahaha, not tha-at!" he said. "The lights! I'm talking about the Fairy Lights, Lord Walter!"

Another rare thing was that Hugh was clearly making an effort to speak more formally to me. He seemed excited. Putting Hugh's personality aside, as we left the house and headed toward the village to see the village head, the exceptionally talented mage said something quite surprising.

"Hugh, you've been to the forest, right?" I asked. "Have you ever met the Spirit or seen any Fairy Lights there?"

"The great Spirit is actually quite shy. The only person who actually has seen it is the head of the academy. We're not even allowed further into the forest than the entrance," Hugh explained with a pout. It made me wonder if he *really* was in his thirties.

The Royal Forest where the Spirit appeared was an odd place with a lot of mystery surrounding it. It seemed to have a barrier around it that normally made it so humans were unable to enter.

"Well, putting that to one side for now, the fact that we could see the lights means there's no question she's a Spirit Caller. Also, her eye...I wonder if she'll let me look at it," Hugh said.

"Is there something suspicious about it?" I asked.

"Nah, not really. It's less that it's suspicious, and more that I want to confirm something, and just investigate it more."

Listening to his voice brighten with curiosity, I remembered that a lot of the Magic Academy staff really loved to research. *It must be rough for the people who need to deal with them all the time...*

"...Don't go forcing her," I warned.

"I won't, I won't. I'll be nice to her. She's cute, after all. Plus, to do something like that to a Spirit Caller... Actually, I wonder what would happen if I did that, I'm kinda curious."

"Don't."

"Heheh, I'm kidding, kiiiiddiiing!"

I continued walking along the country road with my untrustworthy companion.



IT had been a busy day. As I thought about the time that had passed since leaving the Royal Palace earlier, I let out a long sigh. I wondered if anyone expected that after dinner with the doctor, someone would end up using Investigative Magic.

In the simple yet well-tended room, I used the supplied toiletries to freshen up. On the plainly decorated bed, there were soft, clean sheets and a blanket. The bedside table was decorated with a flower from the garden. The curtains were made with a soft material, and the wallpaper looked like a watercolor painting of flowers... I thought about how different my mother's taste really was compared to the solemn residence we had lived in at the Royal Capital.

"She didn't fit in..." I muttered out loud, the statement mixed with a sense of derision toward myself.

My parents had married purely for political reasons. My mother, who had already been engaged to someone she loved at the time, had been sold off into my father's family because her own family was facing bankruptcy. She was expected to become my father's second wife even though he was twenty years her senior. My father had taken care of my mother's family's debt, but had only made any attempt to keep up a relationship with her until his heir was born—me. After that, he neglected my mother while she struggled to adjust to life in the Royal Capital.

Meanwhile, my mother only stayed in the Royal Capital because I was there. If I hadn't been born, they probably would have gotten divorced earlier, and then my mother would have been able to be with the man she really loved. That should have been possible after my father's death, at least.

Although I knew that, I had pretended not to see it, and even

blamed my mother for the failure of my own marriage, even though I knew my wife and I had been to blame.

I don't deserve to be forgiven. I don't want to bother her anymore.

So, I had kept my distance. That was all I knew how to do.

Physically, I was exhausted, but mentally, I was still going strong. As I headed downstairs to the kitchen to get some water, I sensed someone already there. I peeked inside through the half-open kitchen door and saw Margaret, standing with one hand holding a lantern as she stared at the flame boiling the water. She stood out against the darkness.

I didn't want to interrupt, so I was just about to turn and head back to my room, but when I caught a glimpse of Margaret's profile, I found myself calling out to her rather than letting her disappear into the darkness behind me.



THE tea Margaret prepared made me feel nostalgic. My mind was flooded with memories of my mother giving me exactly the same tea on cold winter days, or when I was sick with a cold. I wondered if this tea had been made from the same flowers my mother had cut and dried back then...but I realized that would be impossible. There were no flowers like these growing at our residence in the Royal Capital.

As I drank tea and reminisced, Margaret expressed something that surprised me. Apparently, she felt bad about staying here. But I could see that she and my mother were enjoying living together, and I could imagine how upset my mother would be if Margaret were made to leave.

I wonder if my explanation was good enough. I was so desperate to stop her from leaving that I may have said a little too much.

My eyes widened when I noticed her staring at me intently. After all, a woman and a man shouldn't be this close, especially in the dark of night. I had only noticed it now and I ended up not saying anything since it was too little, too late.

She's a strange woman.

I had an intimidating build, personality, and air about me, but she wasn't scared. I wasn't the type of person who could usually come up with any quick-witted remarks outside of work, but when I

was with her, my words flowed together like magic. She had managed to earn both my mother and Dr. Reynolds's trust in such a short time. I wondered if her desire to lead a peaceful life without friction was a trait of a Spirit Caller, or just something peculiar about her.

I was shocked at myself for feeling somewhat comfortable in this situation. Usually I would never allow myself to end up alone with a member of the opposite sex, especially a stranger. Silently enjoying tea together before going to bed... Even when I'd been with my ex-wife, we'd rarely had any calm moments like this.

"...?" I gasped when her lily-white finger touched my face, and she showed me a blossoming smile.

She had written, *"Now, if only you could do that more often,"* and I realized I had laughed for the first time since arriving.

As I remained frozen to the spot, Margaret stood up and put her empty cup by the sink. She tucked her silky black hair behind her ear, revealing a creamy white pearl earring. Unable to take my eyes off her as she faced away and washed dishes, I ended up thinking about how Mark had been holding her earlier, with her dainty figure wrapped entirely up in his arms.

I was standing up before I knew it, about to reach out and touch her shoulder, when—I bumped into something.

"Oh, Buddy," I said.

My mother's dog had come between us, giving me a fleeting glance as he moved closer to Margaret, begging for pets. Margaret laughed when she noticed, drying her hands before squatting down to pet him like he wanted. Buddy's eyes narrowed with satisfaction.

She then declared that she was going to bed, and I watched her leave with Buddy in tow...at which point I suddenly came back to my senses.

What did I just try to do?

"...She has a pretty good bodyguard," I laughed to myself as I looked at my right hand, still hanging in the air with no destination.

Chapter 3: Various Thoughts

MY morning call—the birds—sure was lively today. Will I ever get used to this boisterous chorus as a lifelong city girl?

I finished getting ready and headed down to the kitchen, where I found Lady Adelaide, as always.

“Good morning, Margaret,” she said. “Did you sleep well? You cleaned up last night, right? You could have just left it. No matter what, I always wake up at the same time every morning.” Lady Adelaide laughed. I felt relieved when I realized she didn’t seem exhausted like she had been the day before.

She gave me her usual hug, then asked if I could go and get some eggs from the chickens and tomatoes from the vegetable plots. I nodded and grabbed my basket. As I headed toward the door, Lord Walter came down the stairs.

“Good morning,” he said. “I see the two of you are early risers as well.”

“Good morning, Walter,” Lady Adelaide replied. “You could’ve slept a little longer.”

“The birds were— Ah, well, I mean to say, I just woke up naturally,” Lord Walter said, correcting himself midsentence.

Oh man, I get that.

As I moved to go outside, our eyes met, and he offered to go with me.

Now, now, Lord Walter, I can see you don’t want to be left alone with Lady Adelaide! Even though I said you should talk to her!

“Could you give me a tour of the residence?” he asked me. “I only got to see the back part of it yesterday.”

I guess I can’t say no to that. As expected of someone working in the Royal Palace, he’s quite the tactician.

...Well, all right. It has been eight years since they last met, and it seems Lady Adelaide isn’t going out of her way to talk to him either, so maybe it’s good that they’re just taking it slow. Him coming to the village at all is progress.

In the end, Lady Adelaide urged us on, so we went out

together. The air was cool, but summer's approach was evident from the sun's strong rays. This world also had UV rays, so I wore a straw hat to protect my sensitive skin and headed toward the chicken coop. I left my magical writing device in my room, so for conversation, I had to borrow Lord Walter's hand.

"You were woken up by the birds, right?" As I wrote that, he responded with a wry smile. *"You should go to bed early tonight. We sleep and rise with the sun, after all."* I smiled at him, since it's not like he could hear me giggle.

Thinking he could help me collect the eggs, this super tall man tried to go inside the coop ahead of me, immediately crashing into everything around him. *His height!* He was fighting for his life in such a small space, and I couldn't help but laugh.

"Sorry, sorry. Let's swap."

Today, there were five eggs. I was beaming with joy as we headed to the vegetable plots.

"Are you going to harvest something?" Lord Walter asked.

"Tomatoes, Lord Walter. Tomatoes." I showed him a ripened tomato and gave him a pair of scissors, trying to instruct him to pick ones that were similar. *"Since you're here, I'll let you take over. I'll hold the basket just behind you."*

He was a little awkward at first, but after the first two or three, he started to get the hang of it, and before long, the basket was full of bright red tomatoes. Although he didn't show it, I had a feeling he was enjoying himself and I couldn't bring myself to stop him...

What are we even gonna do with this mountain of tomatoes? I guess I could make tomato sauce or juice.

I couldn't fit any more tomatoes in my basket, so we took a short break, and I told him a bit about what we could see around us. He seemed particularly interested in the vegetables, flowers, and seedlings he hadn't seen before. For once, he wasn't frowning.

"...I'm sure I came here as a child," he said. *"I just can't remember."*

Things probably look different when you're taller.

Plus, it seemed Lady Adelaide had made this into a vegetable plot when she moved back. I'd heard that it had just been an ordinary back garden filled with flowers before.

Impressed by how naturally Lord Walter took the heavy basket of tomatoes from me, I headed around the side of the building in a

semi-circle with him, emerging at the front of the residence just in front of the forest. That was when we saw a familiar face.

Ah, his frown is back.

“Gooood mooorniiing! I see you two are early risers!” Hugh greeted in an extra loud and chipper voice.

You’re also an early riser, Hugh. I had the day off from helping at the clinic, and I knew he would be coming back to continue his investigation into Spirit Callers, but I hadn’t expected it to be this early.

“Did something happen?” Lord Walter asked. “It’s still quite early.”

“Nah,” Hugh responded. “The young doctor just said he was coming here to pick up some medicinal herbs, so I tagged along.”

The young doctor... I guess he must mean Mark. Huh, I thought he always came to the forest after lunch?

The two continued their conversation as if they had been listening in on my thoughts.

“I see,” Lord Walter said. “Does he always come this early?”

“Who knows? I said I’d be at the house, and he said when he’s finished gathering, he’d come over. Hey, miss, there’s still magic coming from the forest. Can you feel it?” Hugh asked me.

I shook my head. Hugh seemed a little disappointed.

I’m sorry I’m so useless! I can’t know what I don’t know, after all.

“How about breakfast? If you haven’t eaten yet, you can give me a hand putting all these tomatoes to use.”

He didn’t seem to be expecting to be invited to breakfast, so when I wrote that on his hand, Hugh got really excited and nodded in response. It appeared Mark hadn’t eaten yet either, so we decided to go find him and invite him too.

I headed into the kitchen ahead of them to let Lady Adelaide know.



“**THE** young doc thought you were up to something, Walter,” Hugh remarked. “He’s been on edge since last night.”

“Like what?”

“I mean, I get it. Margaret is a nice girl. Plus, she’s cute.”

“Is that all you think about, Hugh?”

"Well, did anything happen after we left?" Hugh asked. "I can't imagine you'd try anything."

"...I didn't."

"Wait, what was that weird pause just now?!"

"Shut up."

"Whaat, I mean, she's single, right?" Hugh pressed. "The young doc hasn't called dibs yet, either."

"Honestly, you..."



LADY Adelaide was a good cook. But out of everything she was teaching me, there was only one thing I couldn't replicate: her omelet. I wasn't a big fan of eggs, but I made an exception for Lady Adelaide's omelets. It didn't smell like sulfur at all, and it was fluffy on the outside and creamy on the inside. It was on a whole different level.

The omelet, which only needed to be seasoned with salt and pepper, would be accompanied by a fresh tomato sauce made with the tomatoes we had just harvested.

How luxurious!

I blanched the tomatoes, cut them into small cubes, and then added finely chopped red onions that had already been blanched. I turned the heat just high enough to warm it through, and when it was ready, I added some diced parsley and salt to bring the flavors together, and it was done. It was a simple sauce, but once it had been drizzled over the yellow omelet, it brought the whole dish together, making it look like a blooming flower.

The tomatoes had fully ripened, so they had a deep flavor, but it was still early in the season, so they were more sour than sweet. They matched perfectly with the savory eggs.

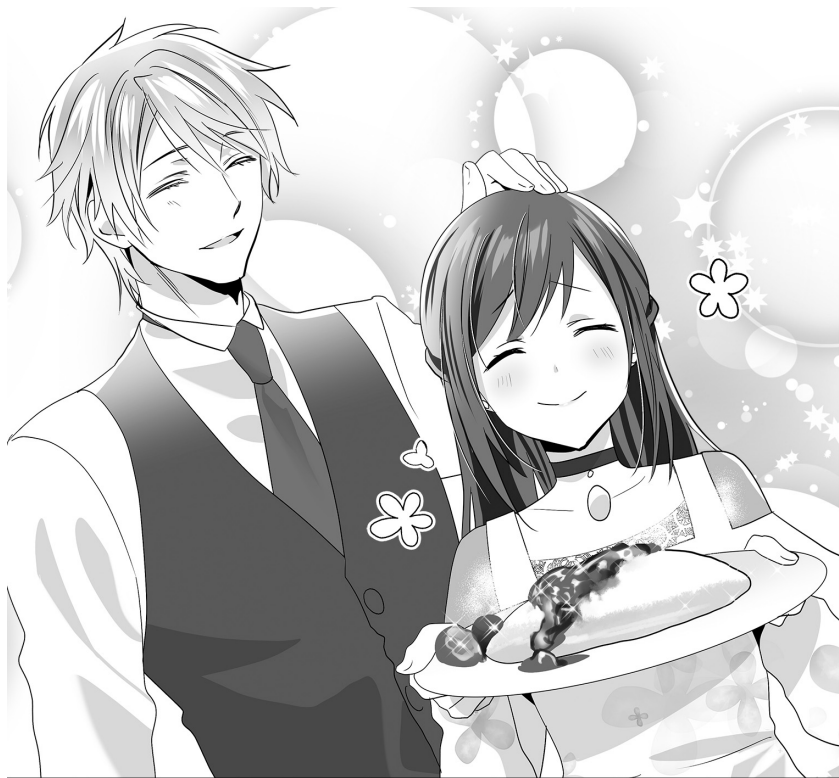
I had already included Hugh in the headcount, so I managed to prepare enough breakfast for everyone.

I wondered what those two were talking about. They hadn't come into the house yet, and when they did, they had Mark in tow.

"Tsk, Mark, you know you can go without asking how I am right away. I have no side effects from the Investigative Magic; I'm doing just fine."

And like I've said repeatedly, you don't have to pet me on the

head. You also don't have to grab the sides of my head and stare at me so deeply. I don't want to be embarrassed like this first thing in the morning. I'm twenty-eight, after all.



Uhh, what should I do? Ah, yeah, Buddy! Come to think of it, I haven't seen Buddy this morning. That's strange, he always has breakfast with us...

When I looked around, I found Buddy asleep in the living room. He was lying in his favorite spot, sleeping soundly.

"He was awake when I got up this morning," Lady Adelaide said. "I wonder if he's tired from being awake so early. Either that or he stayed up all night."

"Walter, was Buddy standing guard all night?" Hugh asked.

"I'll have to reward him for that. Good work, Buddy," Mark replied.

"...I don't know what you're talking about," Walter coughed.

While I didn't quite understand what they were talking about, it seemed Buddy had worked hard. I decided to let him rest.



I handed Mark a basket with his lunch in it before he headed back to the clinic. Inside the basket was some ratatouille I had let sit overnight, a small bread roll, and a juicy meat sandwich made with leftovers from last night's dinner. I had prepared it like roast beef, cut it into thin slices, and put it between two pieces of bread to make a sandwich with perfect proportions.

Mark and Hugh had had breakfast with us, but Dr. Daniel probably hadn't eaten yet, so I told Mark to share his lunch with him.

As Lady Adelaide and I were busy preparing things in the kitchen, the three men were deep in conversation. *It's nice that they get along.* Their ages and personalities were different, but they were all brilliant men with similarly high-ranking positions, so they had that in common.

It reminded me of a guy I had known through my ex-boyfriend who'd been so well educated that he couldn't really have conversations with most people. After entering university, he'd been able to talk with the professors and his *senpai* much more easily, and he'd seemed really pleased about it. *Senpai* is the operative word here—even after becoming a university student, it was still nearly impossible for him to speak with his classmates. These *senpai* weren't even senior students—they'd been researchers above

graduate students.

“It’s really easy to let a conversation keep going when you’re talking about something you like,” he had once said, eyes sparkling. “I never realized how fun it could be.” He was the kind of person to read books about thermodynamics for fun.

He’s no doubt working in a research position at an overseas university somewhere now. I wonder how he’s doing. It must have been hard for him to be on such a different level from everyone else.

In my case, I didn’t suffer from being more intelligent than my peers; I just had no close friends.

My friends from elementary school and I had all gotten separated into different school districts in middle school, so we’d lost touch. During that time, I was also having to get used to doing work around the house, and I didn’t have time to care about much else. I ended up becoming a part of the *kitaku-bu*, a group of kids who didn’t participate in any extracurricular activities and just went straight home after school. I even stopped taking piano lessons.

There were kids I spent recess and lunchtime with, at least. And everyone knew that my parents had died, so they never once blamed me for not being able to keep up with friendships. But there wasn’t anyone I could invite, or anyone who invited me, to do stuff after school or on school breaks. And then I had moved, which further affected my ability to form deep relationships with people.

I only had my photos taken at my Coming of Age Day, an event we attended when we turned twenty years old. I couldn’t think of anyone I wanted to meet there. I’d been busy with junior college, and in my free time, I was working at a family restaurant. I did get close to one person, but they were your run-of-the-mill office worker, and we could rarely ever match our days off to meet. Then I’d ended up transferring jobs.

My sales job was tough, but I did have a good relationship with my coworkers. There weren’t any unreliable *senpai* or selfish *kouhai*, so I didn’t have much to worry about, and when our days off lined up, we’d often go shopping together.

But as for non-work friends, or close friends in general, I’d never had any...

Huh, I guess I was rather lonely.

Although I couldn’t hear what they were talking about, I envied Lord Walter, who was now sulking after Hugh had teased him, and Mark, who was now acting more approachable and

attempting to change the subject. If only he had been that way yesterday.

Everyone in the village was aware that I was a Caller, so all of my relationships with others were based on that. People had warmed up to me since I'd started working at the clinic, but that was to be expected.

I felt like Lady Adelaide and Dr. Daniel saw me for *me* and not just a Caller. *That's why I really love them. I'm not sure how our two guests see me, but I think Mark doesn't see me as just as a Caller either.*

I no longer felt like he was walled off like he had been when I first met him. Ever since he had started petting my head, he had let himself get a lot closer to me in general. *I guess he's actually a pretty affectionate person.*

I would be helping out at the clinic the next day, so I bid Mark goodbye, saying I'd see him tomorrow. I fixed my hair—which had been messed up from all his head pats—and headed back to the kitchen, where Lady Adelaide had prepared some fragrant herbal tea.

"There's another women's meeting today, so I'll be heading out before lunch," Lady Adelaide said. "I let them know you won't be attending. The house is all yours while I'm gone."

"Oh, are you going out today?" Hugh asked.

"Yes. They said they wanted the meetings to go on as usual, so they didn't reschedule this one. Margaret will be staying behind, though."

Lord Walter and Hugh had been sent here to interview me, but they had also come to evaluate how the village was doing in general, so everyone had been instructed to carry on as normal.

The women's meeting was held two or three times a month. They would all knit, crochet, and make preserves. There was a potluck lunch, and it was everyone's one day away from their usual chores and their families, so lively conversation flowed, regardless of age or status. It was a sort of mothers' day out. The only difference was that while chatting, the women's hands were constantly busy, hemming handkerchiefs, embroidering, designing sweater patterns and then knitting or crocheting them right away. The village women were all incredibly talented.

I learned new recipes from the potluck dishes people brought, and there were often attendees who knew enough to tell us what was going to be popular in the Royal Capital ahead of time. It had

become something I looked forward to in this village where there wasn't usually a lot to do.

Once I had gotten back on my feet, I had first shown myself in public at one of the women's meetings rather than at the village head's house, which just showed how important the meetings were. It would have been a critical mistake to make an enemy of the women's gathering attendees. But on the other hand, they were also incredibly reliable. The women of Miselle were mature and calm; there wasn't much drama because everyone was able to communicate like adults.

Usually I would have gone, but I had to take Walter and Hugh around with me to everything I did over the next few days, and men were strictly forbidden from attending women's meetings. That was one of the only iron-clad rules.

So today I would be staying at home. Mrs. Tanya, an exceptionally good baker, had said she'd be unveiling a new pie at today's meeting, so I had been looking forward to that. Lady Adelaide had promised to bring me back a slice because she was worried I'd lock the two men up in the chicken coop and sneak out otherwise.

I mean, Mrs. Tanya's pies are extremely delicious. That flaky crust! The juicy filling! Ah, I'm drooling.

I waved to Lady Adelaide as she left. She had taken her lunch and some embroidery to work on. I went about doing some laundry and cleaning, and before I knew it, it was lunchtime. The menu was the same as what I had given Mark, so I warmed up the ratatouille, sliced the rolls in half, and covered them in garlic butter before lightly toasting them.

Ah, what an appetizing smell.

No matter where you are, the smell of garlic is always appetizing. It totally overpowered the large quantity of parsley I had put in the salad. In my country, cheese and apples were often eaten with green tea, but here, parsley was the dominant flavor.

In general, fragrant tastes were more common here than in my old world. Parsley was a lot easier to eat in this world somehow, and it had become one of my favorite flavors. There was a small section of the field dedicated to parsley, and it grew incredibly well there. Even if you cut it or took a bite of the stalk, it would grow back before you knew it.

If they'd had this in Japan, I definitely would have grown it on my

balcony.

“Aah, that’s such a good smell,” Hugh said. “It’s been a while since I’ve moved around so much. I’m starving.”

“...It smells delicious,” Lord Walter added.

I managed to lure in our two extremely hungry guests with the scent. They should have just been watching me work, but they both ended up helping me with the household chores instead. Apparently, magic was super useful when it came to chores. They dusted and swept, and wiped down surfaces with a wet cloth, and even dried them using magical techniques.

As a result, the gaps between the stairs, the railings, and the shelves I couldn’t usually reach were all sparkling clean.

After seeing the extent of what magic could do, I felt a little down that I had absolutely no magical power of my own... But it seemed there weren’t a lot of people who could use it that well anyway, so this was just the result of a highly skilled mage and an employee of the Royal Palace. As thanks, I gave each of them a sandwich stuffed with roast beef.

Now, it’s time to enjoy our lunches.



“GOOD morning, Walter. You could have slept a little longer.”

Even though I hadn’t seen my son for eight years, I found it easy to talk casually to him. When I thought about it, even back before I left the Royal Capital, I had rarely addressed him by name, only greeting him meekly.

My son had often been busy with work and frequently came home late, and his wife was only concerned with keeping up appearances and her social life. They had been together for years, but they still acted as distant as a butler and housemaid with me; we had exchanged basic pleasantries but rarely opened up to one another. One year after they had married, I had made the decision to leave the Royal Capital and return to Miselle.

“...It would be pointless to try and stop you,” Walter had said, taking a similar tone to his father. “I see you are already firm in your decision. Do as you will. We will take care of everything financial on our side.”

Even though I had given birth to him, the only time I had ever

really been involved with him was when he was small. I had cuddled with him, stroked his hair, given him tea, and made sure he drank it. My mother-in-law had often scolded me, saying I was spoiling him and that he would grow up too coddled.

No matter how much I tried to explain myself, no matter how much I put my soul into it, nothing worked. I had tried my best to get used to their way of life, but it was like I always came face to face with an insurmountable wall. It had felt like I was living in a foreign country and everyone spoke a different language from me.

I caught small glimpses of my son as he grew up to become more and more like his father. Many empty days passed. It may be obvious, but I didn't divorce his father nor choose to live separately because of the contract between our families and my stubbornness.

Eventually, I chose to go to Miselle rather than my own hometown because I didn't want to go to a place that harbored happy memories for me—I was afraid of becoming envious when I saw people who were important to me living happy and relaxed lives of their own.

Although he had been raised with certain biases and among relations that were less than sympathetic to me, Walter never said a bad thing when I left. He had always been a kind child. If he had been raised better, he would no doubt have been able to build a loving, warm family of his own. I felt bad that I had been too powerless to ensure he had that kind of upbringing.

Around the time I had left the Royal Capital and had gotten used to living in the village, Daniel had also left the Royal Capital and opened a clinic in Miselle. Daniel had also been a victim of my family and me, but he always helped me out in a variety of ways. I was never able to return the favor, but knowing that he would be living in the same village with me... That was enough.

“Hugh has gotten a lot taller since he left the village, huh?”

“It's been forever since the young count has come to visit our humble village, right?”

“It sure has been. Adelaide, did you get to talk with Walter last night?”

I listened to their idle chatter with unexpected calm.

I wondered if it was the years we'd been unable to see each other that had done it, or if it was his tag-along Hugh or even Margaret who had influenced him, but my son, who was usually

emotionless and expressionless, had a somewhat relaxed aura around him.

I never once thought I would be able to speak with him in such a relaxed manner.

"We'll give them a proper welcome. We'll make all their favorite things so they eat a lot."

Margaret had no idea how much she had helped me when she'd said that. And if that didn't work, she happily declared that she would force them to enjoy her "special cookies." She was really bringing a great deal of light to the remaining years of my life.

"Arguing and making up are just a part of life," Margaret had written on my palm as she'd stared wistfully into the distance.

Margaret had lost both her parents at a young age and left everything behind when she'd been summoned here.

This week with my son will no doubt begin to make up for the past ten years, I thought to myself as I tried to remember what his favorite foods were, digging deep into my past memories as my hands continued with my needlework.



IT was a day when I was helping out at the clinic. Recently I had been going there maybe once or twice a week, whenever I was requested. Word traveled fast in the village, so it was easy for people to know when I would be in that day if they needed me. In emergency situations, neighbors would help out, so I mostly made it easier for mothers to make routine visits to the clinic anyway. They could bring all their children with them when they got their regular checkups.

When we met up, Hugh took my basket, which had my lunch in it. As for Walter, he was staying at home with Lady Adelaide! They had made so much progress in only three days.

I think Buddy will be able to help with the awkward atmosphere... or I hope so, anyway.

Apparently, the village head would be at the mansion talking with Lord Walter about the village, so that was why he was at home with Lady Adelaide. Some of the mansion's staff would also be there today, so they wouldn't be *completely* alone, which had worked out nicely. *Good luck, you two.*

Hugh accompanied me on my walk to the clinic, keeping the same pace even though I was walking slowly. He kept pointing things out, mentioning what had changed, what was the same, almost as if he was playing a game of Spot the Difference.

Speaking of which, Miselle was a village that not a lot of people left, and not a lot of new people moved into, so I wondered why Hugh had moved to the Royal Capital. It didn't seem like jobs that required you to move were common here. I didn't really want to ask, though, in case there was a really serious reason...but as I was thinking about that, our eyes met, causing Hugh to ask me what was up.

I was of two minds about telling him, but Hugh had already asked me a ton of questions, so surely we were on equal footing by now.

He had asked me everything from how my world's government was formed, to how society worked, to questions about my family, my religion... We had more or less covered everything from personal to public matters. I wasn't keeping my ex-boyfriend a secret, so I had told him about that when he asked. Hugh had responded that he found the boundaries between lover, fiancé, and husband as I described them to be a little unclear.

Yeah, I guess he's right. Living together as a couple and having a de-facto marriage simply wouldn't fly here.

And when I had told him that where I came from, it wasn't morally acceptable to have a mistress, bigamy was a crime, and same-sex couples were allowed to a certain extent, he'd looked at me in disbelief. *Yeah, no surprise there.*

"Ah," I wrote into his palm when I decided to finally ask him about why he had left. *"I don't want to drop it, so while we're walking, I won't use the magical device you gave me. If it's too difficult to talk about this, you don't have to."*

"Well, you see, what happened was that my magical powers suddenly got really strong. They kind of grew with my height," Hugh explained. "I had to learn how to control them, so I joined the Magic Academy in the Royal Capital. My folks were clothiers, and the Royal Capital had been asking them to come work there for years by that point anyway, so it was a good opportunity and we ended up moving."

"They even made this robe," Hugh bragged with a smile, waving the black mage's robe he wore wrapped around his

shoulders at me.

It's pretty amazing that his parents make clothes for the whole nation.

He let me have a closer look at the embroidery, which was surrounded by threads of the same color all the way around... *Yeah, they are very talented.* It seemed his younger sister and her husband also owned a shop in the Royal Capital.

"Magic is hereditary, so there are a lot of high-level magic users that come out of noble families. That's the case for Walter and the young doc," he continued. "Every now and then, someone really skilled like me turns up among the commoners. Apparently one of my great grandfathers might have been loosely related to a noble family, so a lot of people say I must get it from that bloodline."

Everyone may have had magic in this world, but it seemed there was a lot they didn't know about it. Well, even in my old world, there were things we didn't know yet about genetics and the human brain and things like that.

There weren't that many people who were talented magic users like Hugh or Lord Walter, and it seemed there were even fewer who actually specialized in it. That seemed to be reserved for nobles, members of the Magic Academy, or people involved with work at the palace.

Putting Hugh to one side, because he was an outlier, Lord Walter seemed to be an especially high-level all-rounder. Mark and Daniel didn't have as much magical power as Lord Walter, but they seemed to be more skilled at using certain kinds. It made sense when I thought about it that way.

"In the olden days, people like us were used as tools of war. Even now, we're controlled by the country. Nobles don't distance themselves from commoners because of class differences; they do it because deep down there's still the impression that 'those guys are scary,'" Hugh said, touching on a heavy topic with ease. Of course I understood that in a world where there were no airplanes or missiles, magical ability could be used as a way of threatening with force. It all depended on the person wielding the power.

"That's why it was so refreshing, Miss, for you to use my magic for laundry and housecleaning."

"Ah, that's right, I did use a lot of your magic yesterday! But you seemed to be enjoying yourself, and that's why you ended up going nuts with it, right?"

Now that I thought about it, Lord Walter had seemed pretty astonished, watching me fumble around as Hugh had laughed and laughed, pointing to his eyes, saying he had his own special kind of magic.

“Using someone with a scary level of magical power like me as a cleaning tool. Honestly, it was so fun. Thanks, Margaret.”

He then stopped walking, grabbed my free hand, and leaned in close to my face. Shocked, I tried to back away, but he grabbed me and pulled me in...

Wait a second, why does he look so serious? And besides that, he's been calling me "miss" this whole time, but he just called me by my name.

This is quite the situation.

In my twenty-eight years living in Japan, I'd had a partner, and I'd also experienced sexual harassment before, but never something like this. In other words, I had no idea how to deal with it.

After all, I had only been taught the basics of this world, and I was still in the early stages of learning about magic. I had always seen the doctor and Mark using magic for healing; I had certainly never seen anyone use it to scare people. And even when Investigative Magic had been used on me, I hadn't been scared or anything. So, as a result, I didn't think Hugh needed to thank me for anything.

He continued talking to me as my mouth opened and closed without any sound coming out. “You see, Margaret,” he said. “I love women, but I long ago decided I would never marry or have children. It's rough being low-born but having a lot of magical power. Nobles look down on you, and other people of the same social status are afraid of you. I don't belong anywhere. You're controlled by your magic, and if you don't learn to control it, you can't lead a normal life. I don't want to put my children or grandchildren through that. Of course, you do have nobles like Lord Walter, and there are a variety of different people at the Magic Academy. But even then, I'm against bringing more magic users into the world.”

Hugh's hand, where he was still holding mine, was cold and shaking a little. He looked slightly past me, narrowing his eyes toward the village center as he muttered his next words.

“...Honestly, I didn't want to come back to Miselle. There are a

lot of people I injured, and a lot of things I broke back when I couldn't control my magic. But even so, on that first day, when we got here, everyone had gathered to wait for me. They reminisced about when I'd lost control of my magic, laughing and saying it sure had been something! Nobody blamed me for anything. It felt like a huge weight had been lifted off my chest," he went on. "So, Margaret. Thank you for coming to this world...to Miselle. If you hadn't come here, I would never have returned to Miselle, and I would have continued to be weighed down by my past."

Hugh's emerald green eyes softened into a gentle smile as he gently stroked my hair with his free hand, then ran a finger down my cheek. He stared at me silently as our eyes met.

"Uh, I'm sorry, I shouldn't be doing this."

His face flushed and he covered his mouth with his hand before turning away with a swish of his robe. "Shall we be off?" he asked as he began walking. I hurried after him, utterly confused by what had just happened.



ONCE I arrived at the clinic, I greeted Dr. Daniel and Mark and then spread out a rug like always. Hugh seemed incredibly curious about what I was doing. But when I said I was finished...

"Now, don't pull that face." He looked so disappointed!

As I headed into the break room to put down my things and wash my hands, the patients started arriving.

"Morning, Margaret! Thanks for looking after my little one today," a cheerful voice said, echoing around the room. I knew who it was without even looking: Mrs. Tanya. She had been married to the blacksmith from the next village over for three years. When I had first met her, she had informed me with a laugh that because her home and workplace were so noisy, she had become accustomed to talking loudly.

She had a sisterly aura about her, which was rare in this village, and was friendly with everyone. At the women's meeting, Mrs. Tanya was the first person to speak with me. She was very crude—I mean, big-hearted, and while she wasn't that good at sewing or crocheting, she was a fantastic cook. Like yesterday's pie.

"Mrs. Tanya, I really enjoyed it. Your loquat pie was positively

delicious!"

The brand new pie Mrs. Tanya had unveiled at the women's meeting I hadn't been able to attend had been made with loquats. She had scooped out the loquat pulp and made it into a compote like a light custard cream. Combined with the crispy, flaky pastry... *ah*. It was absolute bliss.

Mrs. Tanya, aware of my reason for missing the meeting, had brought enough extra pie for me, Lord Walter, and Hugh.

"Ah, are you the person behind yesterday's pie? That was so delicious. If you took it to the Royal Capital, it'd sell like hotcakes," Hugh said. "My mother and younger sister would love it!"

"Oh my, thank you for saying that, but it's just a hobby! I'm just happy if people find it delicious," Mrs. Tanya said. "Ohh, you can write with this? That's an interesting little device. Isn't that handy, Margaret?" she asked me, before Mark called her over.

She handed me her son, John... *Hm? Her temperature seems a little high.*

"I haven't been feeling too great lately," she told me. "My fever isn't too high, but I feel kind of sluggish. Dan heard you'd be at the clinic today, so he told me to come by. All right, I'm gonna go see the doctor now, so you be a good boy and wait for me."

She stroked John's head before walking into the examination room. Her voice sounded the same, but now that she mentioned it, she did look a little drained...

Mrs. Tanya, those symptoms sound a lot like...

John had tears in his eyes as he stretched his hand out, trying to reach for his mother. But once he saw her enter the examination room and the door swung shut behind her, he gave up and cuddled into my clothes. *Aw, how cute.*

I comforted him by patting him on the back as we sat down on the carpet, and I gave him some marbles to play with. John, who was close to two years old, played with them from his seat in my lap. He was good at walking and running, but his speaking seemed a little delayed. So far he could really only say "ooh" and "aah." He resembled his father, who was also not very talkative, and he was a pleasant child, but today he seemed even quieter than usual.

I felt his forehead and his neck. As I had suspected, he also had a temperature. Was he crying because he didn't feel well, and not because his mother had left?

"What's wrong, is there something wrong with him?" Mark

asked me as I hastily checked John's temperature. I wrote on the magical writing device that John may also have a fever. Mark nodded.

John looked at me with watery eyes. I smiled as I leaned my forehead against his to check his temperature. John blinked in surprise, then shrieked with joy. He seemed to be having fun, so I did it again.

Oh, one more time? Okay!

Because he enjoyed it so much, we tapped foreheads over and over, and then by the end, he was grabbing onto my cheeks and rubbing his forehead against mine. I had absolutely no idea what was so fun about it, but John loved it. After a while, it kind of hurt a little, but, *yes, all right, one more time!*

"...Your forehead is turning red," Mark said with a wry smile when he came to get John. I waved goodbye as the two of them headed into the examination room. Hugh was grinning next to me.

"That seemed like fun. Do you always play with them like that?"

If I always played with them like that, my forehead would be raw for sure.



MRS. Tanya returned to the waiting room with John in her arms.

"I've got another one on the way!" she said, cheeks red as she patted her stomach. *As I thought!* I'd had a feeling, knowing she was a married woman who had been tired lately! My *senpai* and my *kouhai* both had similar symptoms when they'd been pregnant.

Mrs. Tanya said she had also been completely oblivious when she'd gotten pregnant with John. As everyone was wishing her congratulations, her husband, Dan, came bursting into the room, almost taking the door with him. He was still dressed in his work clothes and he looked pale.

"T-Tanya, are you all right? Someone told me to come here quickly. What happened? Are you ill?"

"Dan, calm down," Mrs. Tanya said. "Could you go home and take John with you? I'm going to go meet with Mistress Kris."

Mistress Kris was the only midwife in the village. Dan was still out of breath, seemingly unable to wrap his mind around the

situation. Anyone could tell that he was still quite shaken, judging by how much he was talking, which was very unusual for him.

“M-Mistress Kris? Huh, but Tanya, that means...”

“Honestly, you really are slow on the uptake, aren’t you?” his wife teased. “It means John is going to be an older brother.”

Dan’s pale face suddenly flushed with color as all the energy left his body and he collapsed to the ground. Everyone in the waiting room took turns offering him their congratulations and patting him on the back, livening up the clinic’s atmosphere.

Ah, I got to witness something lovely. I found myself smiling. Mrs. Tanya patted John on the head; now Dan was the one holding their cute son.

“John just has a little cold. I had no idea. Since I also have a temperature, I couldn’t tell he had one!” Tanya explained. “Sorry about that. Thank you for noticing, though, Margaret.”

Although Dan still seemed out of it, he stood up and left the clinic with Mrs. Tanya and John, all smiling.

I headed back into the clinic after seeing them off. As I started playing with a new child who had just arrived, a bunch of old men who had mostly kept their distance until now started talking to me.

“Are you that Spirit Caller?” one of them asked. “I thought you’d have more of a divine aura about you, but you’re no different than my granddaughter.”

“Hey, Tom, you can’t say that to a Caller!”

“I mean, you’re right, Terry, but...yeah. Honestly...she just looks like a normal lady...”

“Pat, not you, too!”

“There are *some* differences, but other than that, she’s just the same.”

He only meant that my eyes were two different colors and that I had Japanese features. They weren’t being mean or anything. The old men continued gossiping. I picked up a baby—whose face was covered in drool—and as she grabbed my face, we nodded to one another.

“Margaret really is *what you see is what you get*, huh,” Hugh said.

“Oh, you think so too?”

“Yep. If Holly were here, I’m sure the two of them would get along great.”

“Ah, speaking of Holly, that one time—”

Hugh had even joined in the conversation, talking about his younger sister Holly and catching up with the old men. It seemed that to everyone in this country, Spirit Callers were supposed to have more of a divine presence. I felt a little down, and I looked toward the gossiping group with an apologetic face.

I'm sorry. I'm sorry I'm just an ordinary person who can't do anything.

Thankfully, my heart began to relax when the old men showed that they were actually pretty open-minded.

"There's nothing wrong with change, after all."

"That's right. I never was one for formalities and so on."

They then proceeded to pat me on the head before leaving to go home... *I'm an adult, by the way.*

I began to feel so disheartened about not looking my age that the children I was playing with started trying to cheer me up.

Hey, Mark, I can see that you're laughing in the examination room! No dessert for you tonight. Honestly.



"SO you'll be returning to the Royal Capital this afternoon, Hugh?" Dr. Daniel asked.

"Yes. Our investigation regarding the Spirit Caller is complete for now, so I'll be leaving. Walter is here on vacation as well, though, so he'll be staying," Hugh explained. "Although it was only for a short time, thank you for letting me stay," he finished with a small bow.

We were having lunch in the break room at the clinic. Hugh's stay in Miselle would be ending today. After spending two nights at the doctor's home, the womanizer—the *friendly* Hugh was now close enough with Mark and the doctor that they could enjoy a casual conversation.

Hugh was acting like nothing had happened since his confession to me earlier that morning, so I did the same. But it felt a little weird. Especially under Mark's gaze...

It feels like he knows something.

I continued eating, acting oblivious.

Today's lunch was scones. They'd been made from Lady Adelaide's own recipe, which used whole wheat flour to bring out

more of the taste and turn them from a snack into an actual meal.

I had really wanted to serve them fresh out of the oven, but that wasn't possible, so instead, I borrowed the doctor's oven and just warmed them up a little bit. I paired the scones with a meatloaf packed with carrots and green beans, and a bean salad on the side. *Another delicious lunch.*

It felt like every time I came up to the second floor of the doctor's home, there were more books. I respected that as a doctor, it was important to keep studying and cultivate the desire to learn more, but there were even books written in languages other than this country's. *Just how high-spec is that?*

As I thought about it and ate, Hugh pointed to the magical writing device, which was lying on the corner of the table. "You can keep using this until Walter leaves," he said. "If there's anything you want us to change, let Walter know. I'll bring it right back once it's been improved."

Both my hands and my mouth were busy, so I just nodded in response.

"You don't have to bring it yourself, Hugh," Mark quipped. "You can just send it through the mail."

"Ah, Mark, you're so cold. Aren't you supposed to say, 'We await your speedy return!' or something?" Hugh teased.

"Nope."

"You don't need to be so coy..."

They're so close now! Just like high school boys. Mark had even started calling Hugh by his first name.

"Why don't you come work at the Magic Clinic instead of here? There are a lot of friendly docs there."

"I'm good."

Dr. Daniel and I exchanged looks and laughed at their banter, which had become the norm over the past few days.



WE finished lunch and then headed out to the horse and carriage that had already arrived. Hugh was surprised that so many of the villagers had gathered to see him off.

He had a troubled smile as he was handed a variety of souvenirs, and it looked like he was trying his best not to cry.

“Hey, Sara, come over here.”

“Come on over, you were his neighbor!”

Sara was pushed through the wall of people. She always smiled calmly at the women’s meetings, and I had become quite close to her.

She had married someone from a neighboring village, but her husband had passed away the year before last, so it seemed she had returned to Miselle with her daughter, Emily. Her family had been close to Hugh’s family before they moved, so she must have been Hugh’s childhood friend.

Sara handed Hugh a small package. He didn’t have much to say other than, “I’ll be back some time,” and then he climbed into the carriage, which faded out of sight as it clattered away. Eventually, the people who had gathered also began to disperse.

As I headed back to the clinic, my eyes were drawn to a group of girls. Their cheeks were flushed a dark red and they kept glancing in a specific direction. When I followed their gaze, I saw Mark talking with some of the young men from the village. He seemed to be aware of the girls watching him, but he made no attempt to look back at them.

As far as I knew, I was the only young person of the opposite sex that Mark interacted with. His hands that pet my head, his arms that always supported me when I fell, and the times when we caught each other’s eyes... I wasn’t so oblivious that I couldn’t come up with an explanation as to why. It was incredibly obvious.

At first, I had thought Mark was cold and unfeeling. But I had learned over time that he only gave that impression because of his complicated family environment growing up. Even talented people can have gone through difficulties and struggles in the past.

As for my own feelings about Mark, I wasn’t about to write off what I felt when his hand touched my hair. I knew it was different from what I felt when Lady Adelaide or the doctor did the same thing. However, I had yet to make up my mind about what the feeling was exactly. Or where I stood in all of this.

“Margaret, are you feeling lonely?”

I had stopped in my tracks without realizing it. Dr. Daniel gave me a light pat on the back, bringing me back down to earth. *Do I feel lonely...*? I didn’t think so. I had the doctor and Lady Adelaide... Buddy and Mark. I was lucky to have such company around me. That was why I felt uneasy, not lonely.

Even though Spirit Callers were supposed to be impressive divine beings, I couldn't really do anything special. I had no magical ability, even though everyone else in this world did. I could see fairies, but that was it. Even if they said I was connected to Spirits, I had no conscious understanding of what that meant. Clearly, the Spirits weren't planning to use me for anything, either.

I wonder if it's okay for them to accept me like they have, even though I can't do anything. There are surely other people they should be more concerned about. I shouldn't rely on others so much; I can barely even stand on my own.

I couldn't bring myself to explain how I felt, and I worried I would make him worry about it. So I had been laughing to try and fool Dr. Daniel, and as always, I felt a big, warm hand on top of my head.

...Dad.

As I watched the doctor walk on ahead, he reminded me of the father I hadn't been able to see since his accident. The tears I had held back for so long started to spill down my cheeks.



TEARS?

I saw something sparkle on Margaret's cheek as she headed back into the clinic after the doctor.

"Hm, what's up, Mark?"

"Nothing, I'll get back to work now."

I hastily cut off the conversation, and without even looking at who I was speaking with, I bid them goodbye.

"All right," they replied. "Good luck." And they tapped me on the back with a knowing expression... Was it really that easy to tell?

As I hurried into the clinic, I realized that there was no one in the waiting room. Dr. Daniel asked me to let him know if any patients arrived to see him, then headed upstairs with a book and a letter. I heard a sound coming from the break room. Margaret was probably in there.

I opened the curtain that divided the rooms and called out to Margaret, who was cleaning up the table. She looked over at me. Her eyes were a little red and looked wet.

“...Are you sad Hugh left?” I asked.

There wasn't anything going on between them; Hugh had confirmed that himself. But they still had a strange energy together. It didn't feel like love...and even though I was sure it was something different, I was unable to put my finger on what it was exactly. Margaret often laughed off difficult questions, but I knew she would never lie.

So I looked straight at her while I waited for her answer. She shook her head. She then looked around for the magical writing device, but I grabbed her wrist. I wanted to hear what she had to say from her, not from that device. I used a finger from my other hand to wipe away a stray tear on her cheek. She looked at her wrist and sighed as if she had understood my feelings before slowly writing into my palm.

“...Father?”

Margaret nodded awkwardly. It seemed that when the doctor had patted her on the head, she'd been reminded of her father, who had passed away in an accident. She laughed, adding that her father had rarely ever stroked her on the head, though. Apparently, she had cried so much back when her father had passed away that she'd thought she no longer had any tears left to cry about it.

I suddenly felt weak, and my chest became cold. She had spoken about her old world and her family before, but even though she had always seemed nostalgic, most of the time she kept it simple.

I wondered if Hugh's questions for her had unburied something she had hidden away deep within her.

So many of her relatives had passed away, and she didn't have a fiancé or a husband. Even so, she had still left many important things behind, and had lost a great deal when she had been summoned here. I knew it was impossible for her not to be at least a little homesick.

Even if we did find a way to send her back, though, I wouldn't be the one to do it. My own selfishness on the matter made me feel a little nauseated, but it was the truth.

Margaret tried to smooth it over by saying that her sudden bout of sadness had nothing to do with Hugh's questions, and that she was only worried it would be awkward between Lord Walter and Lady Adelaide now that they had lost their mood maker, Hugh. I agreed with her completely. Then I realized I was almost holding

her entirely in my arms.

Damn. Even though I was trying to restrain myself.

Most of the time, Margaret seemed quite carefree, but every now and then, her eyes would cloud over like she was remembering something. It seemed that came more from her confusion and uneasiness around her position as a Spirit Caller, and less from homesickness and yearning for her own world. She couldn't be happy just closing her eyes, shutting herself off from the world, and being protected while she lived an easy life. Rather than being like a bird locked up in a cage, she would do better being allowed to soar through the skies and sing from the trees. With time, I thought she would get accustomed to this world and eventually come to accept it.

Margaret looked at me curiously as I thought in silence.

She moved her finger to ask me what was wrong, though she didn't seem to question why we were so physically close. I had already gotten the answer to my original question, so it was a little weird that I had yet to pull away from her. But even though I was well aware of that, it felt like my hand had melted into hers. I couldn't move it.

I struggled to give her an answer. After a moment, she began to spell out words on my palm again. And as I read what she wrote, I felt something snap inside me.

I stopped her right hand, which was writing nonsense, and then I ran a finger down the side of her face and raised her chin. Realizing she had misspoken, her eyes began to dart all around, but I managed to catch her gaze. I saw my own face reflected in her eyes, making an expression I had never seen before—I was laughing without restraint.

I was aware I was scaring Margaret, but whose fault was that?

"Margaret? Listen carefully," I said. "I'm not attracted to men. The reason why I don't fall for the girls in the village who are always trying to seduce me is because I don't like them, and I'm not interested in them. They're just annoying. There's only one person I have eyes for."

Where had she even gotten that sort of idea? Just because I wasn't interested in the women in the village didn't mean I preferred men. I wondered if that was the norm in her old world. I thought I had gotten my feelings across somewhat, but apparently not well enough. I had been planning on just waiting, but that

wouldn't fly any longer.

"...You came to this world to meet us. I don't think it's just because you're a Spirit Caller," I said. "If anything, that's the second most important reason you came here. And you can stay here forever."

Here. In Miselle. In my arms.

"You do know that Dr. Daniel and Lady Adelaide don't fawn over you just because you're a Spirit Caller, right?" I continued.

Her nervous eyes calmed as she hesitantly nodded.

That's right. Anyone can be a Spirit Caller. What's important is that Margaret specifically came here.

"I wonder if Lady Adelaide would have let another person who was a Spirit Caller stay with her. Or if the doctor would continue to keep treating them past when it was absolutely necessary," I ventured. "You weren't asked to come help out at the clinic because you're a Spirit Caller... You were asked because you're Margaret. Even I—"



Her wet eyes caught my gaze, and she held my hand tighter. I ran a finger down her blushing cheek again, and then I kissed the slender finger she had been using to write on my palm. Her mouth opened and closed like a goldfish, but all that came out was a sweet sigh.

“You can always make a place into somewhere you belong. If you need a reason, you can find one,” I said. “So don’t worry, you can fall for me. Just like how I’ve fallen for you.”

Margaret took a deep breath. Her eyes looked up as if she was searching for something, and she mouthed my name with her lips.

Say it more. Keep saying my name.

I pulled her slender body closer, and now we were so close we could hear one another’s heartbeats.

Her long black hair, which had grown a little since she had arrived in this world, draped down her back. All the emotions she had been attempting to hide with a smile, I wanted to make all of it mine. I was envious of the sweet expressions she made for Lady Adelaide and the doctor; I even envied her blind trust in Buddy.

I realized suddenly that I had a variety of emotions about the people in my life. And surprisingly, I didn’t dislike it.

All of those feelings came from Margaret. I still didn’t want to let go of her hand.

“You can stay here,” I said again. “And, Margaret...fall in love with me.”

After a moment’s hesitation, she responded by wrapping her arms around me.



MY mother had a few select places in her home where she tended to be: the kitchen, the field by the back garden, or the rocking chair on the veranda.

So I avoided those three places, choosing instead to hole myself up in the guest parlor while working on writing a report. I knew if I stayed there until the village head arrived, I could get through the day without bumping into her.

After breakfast, Margaret had an expression on her face that looked somehow both expectant, and like she was scolding her good-for-nothing older brother, as she wrote one short sentence into

my palm before heading to the clinic with Hugh.

I wondered if she remembered what I had blurted out the other night. I'd found it frustrating myself, so I wondered how it looked to someone on the outside, the fact that it was harder for me to speak with my mother than in a meeting at the Royal Palace.

Two of the mansion's staff were outside folding laundry and cleaning while Buddy played next to them. I wondered how long it would be before the village head arrived...

Is now the time to talk to her? I held my breath as I peeked into the kitchen. As I thought, my mother was in there kneading a floury mound of dough.

I clenched my right hand and called out to her. "...What are you making?" I asked.

"Oh, Walter. I thought we could have lunch with the village head, so I'm making scones," she said.

"Didn't Margaret already make some this morning?"

"Those were to take to the clinic. They're more delicious when freshly baked."

A meal for a group of important guests; she wasn't one to balk at work. Come to think of it, since I had come here, everything my mother had made had been my favorite foods; it was encouraging.

"I see you still enjoy cooking," I remarked.

"Yeah, I do enjoy it," she agreed. "Cooking and working in the fields... I guess that's what disqualifies me from being a noble. I'm sorry you have a mother like me."

No, that's not what I was trying to get her to say. She's not the one who needs to apologize.

"I'm the one who should be apologizing," I said, taking that small first step. "I didn't think you'd forgive me, but—I've been putting it off for so long because I was afraid you would try to apologize."

"Walter...?"

My mother stopped kneading the dough as she looked up at me in disbelief. I was a lot taller than my mother, so she almost had to look straight up at me, but she never once looked away.

"I always wanted to apologize. For forcing you to lead a life you couldn't get used to for years. For the fact that you were shackled to the count because of me. For me, being unable to keep the servants from making you feel ashamed. For being so stubborn and refusing to give in...and for my ex-wife..." I rambled.

"Th-That wasn't your fault..." my mother responded.

"No, it was my responsibility," I insisted. "I could have done something about all of it."

It was pathetic of me, actually. And the fact that it had taken me so long to realize all this made me wonder just how narrow-minded I really was.

"Ah, but you can put most of that down to your position. I'm the one to blame, not you," my mother argued.

"Maybe an outsider would think that, but within the family, it's not right. You didn't do anything wrong."

"...I'm the one in the wrong," my mother said again. "If only I could have done something better, you..."

Of course, my mother would never blame someone else. She had done the incredibly aristocratic thing of assuming all the blame. She was so different from my grandmother and my private tutor. I should have been proud to have a mother like her.

Once I had realized that it wasn't me, but my mother who would get scolded if I said I wanted to see her as a child, I stopped asking. So even though we lived in the same residence, we'd never gotten to see each other. The distance forced between us had eventually entered my heart. No doubt it was my father and grandmother's idea to ensure I'd have a proper upbringing as the heir to Count Dustin.

Now that I had grown up, I didn't think my whole past had been a mistake, but there were certainly other ways to have gone about it.

"Can you accept my apology? If you can't forgive me, I promise never to bother you again after this."

It was a somewhat passive-aggressive way of saying it, even to my own ears. However, I knew if I didn't word it like that, it wouldn't get through to her. I didn't want her apology; I wanted to be free from guilt.

I hoped she would realize that. I clenched my fist again while I waited for her to respond.

"...You're a stubborn one, Walter."

"Just like you, Mother."

"I know you're a kind boy."

"I get that from you, too."

And then I noticed something shiny on her cheek as she looked away. Her tears continued to fall, dropping into the flour on the

counter before disappearing.

“...I accept your apology,” she finally said. “I forgive you, Walter.”

“Thank...you. Mom.”

My mother, paying no attention to the fact that she was covered in flour, gave me a big hug. She was smaller than I remembered, but she was still just as warm.

The short sentence Margaret had spelled out on my hand came to mind:

“It’s never too late.”

You were right, Margaret.



EVEN though the dough was now seasoned with her tears, my mother finished kneading it and put it in the oven.

“We’ll keep it to mark the occasion. I can’t bring myself to throw it away.”

With an embarrassed look, she began to remake the scones from scratch, rejecting my offer to help.

“Just sit over there and talk about something instead.”

When my mother handed me some tea and asked to listen to my voice, I couldn’t really say no. I took off my jacket, which was now white with flour, and took a seat at the table. I couldn’t think of any topics my mother would enjoy particularly, so I decided on something we both had in common: Dr. Reynolds—I mean Dr. Daniel, and Margaret.

“You’re quite close with her. Was it like that from the start?” I asked.

“Margaret? You’re right. I don’t know why, but I never felt like I had to keep my guard up around her. Even Daniel says I go on like I’m her mother.”

“It looks that way to me too. She looks more like she’s your child than I do.” She stopped moving her hands. *Ah, I don’t want her to get the wrong idea; I didn’t mean it like that. Conversations between us keep ending up like this.*

“Walter...”

“I don’t mean it in a bad way. If anything, I was relieved,” I hastily explained. “Okay, and maybe a little bit jealous.”

My mother looked shocked. It had been a while since I'd seen that.

"I'm glad you're enjoying life here in Miselle," I said. "Plus, you're not alone. That's reassuring."

"...Thanks. You're being awfully blunt today."

"That one kind of just slipped out. But I would have regretted it for the rest of my life if I hadn't said anything."

"Yeah...Okay."

She started making another ball of dough, lining them up perfectly like magic.

"Margaret's going to stay here forever, right?" I asked.

"Yeah," my mother replied. "I told her she can stay here until she gets married."

"Does she have any plans to?"

"I don't want to say she doesn't. She's quite popular, though Daniel and Buddy are keeping her well-guarded, so I don't think she's realized it herself. He's delaying her marriage like she's his own daughter," my mother laughed.

Dr. Daniel and Buddy were certainly gifted at it.

"Are you interested in her?" my mother asked, sounding somewhat mischievous.

"...I think she's a wonderful woman," I responded diplomatically. "She isn't afraid of me, and I feel strangely calm when I'm with her."

"I get that, it's the same for me. She really feels like family. She's so easy to get along with."

Family... *family*. I never really had that, assuming she was talking about the kind of family that would all sit around the table together. I brought my cup to my lips.

"If it came to that," my mother said, "I think you or Mark would be a good match for her."

I choked on my tea.

"Oh, was that a surprise?" she asked.

"...I've already failed at marriage once."

"Well, that depends on the partner, too, of course," my mother said. "And you need to start thinking about an heir."

"I can always adopt. I'll figure it out."

"Of course, I'll leave that up to you," she said. "You can do what you like."

It was obvious that Mark was developing feelings for Margaret,

but I wondered how Margaret felt about him. There was no denying that after my mother and the doctor, she was closest to Mark.

My mother finished preparing the dough, washed her hands, and cleaned the table. It was satisfying to watch her be so economical with her time.

I thought about when I had seen my mother and Margaret standing next to one another in the kitchen, laughing as they cooked and cleaned together, completely in sync with one another. What if I were to insert myself into that scene, which I had seen so many times over the past three days—

“That said,” I said, “I see her as more of a sister than a wife.”

The quiet and calm of that night. I think you would definitely call that familial love rather than romantic love.

It had been a long time since I had seen my mother smile so happily.



MY conversation about the village with the village head and my mother ended quickly. Usually, there was a yearly earnings call, and a steward would be dispatched to collect taxes twice a year, so it had been a while since I had seen the land with my own eyes, and there were in fact a lot of issues.

We finished lunch, and the village head and I left my mother at home while we traveled into the village by horse-drawn carriage. We planned to go around and look at the areas that needed repairs so we could decide on the order of doing things and how to go about everything that needed to be done.

We made good time, so after parting with the village head, I asked for the carriage to take me to the clinic. Hugh had returned to the Royal Capital, and Buddy was at the house with my mother. I wondered why they made Margaret walk home alone... I would have thought Mark would walk with her.

Margaret was standing outside when I arrived. She looked surprised to see me because we hadn't been planning to get together. She seemed to have just finished seeing some patients off.

“I finished my inspections, so I thought I'd come by,” I said. “You'll be finished soon, right? How are you planning on getting back home?”

Margaret used my palm to ask me to wait a little before she headed back into the clinic. In the meantime, Mark had heard the horse-drawn carriage and came outside. The two of them had a quick conversation in the doorway, but it was clear that the general atmosphere around them had changed since yesterday.

I see it now. My mom's discerning eye is as impressive as ever.

As I watched them, I saw Mark urge Margaret back inside before he came to stand near the carriage.

"...Are you here to pick her up?" he asked.

"I just stopped by on my way back," I responded. "You don't have to look so alarmed."

He probably thought he had a solid poker face, so his eyes opened wide with surprise. It seemed the talented Mark Disraeli stopped at nothing when it came to the object of his affections. It was quite adorable.

"You needn't worry," I reassured him. "While she is a splendid woman, I don't see her that way."

"...That may be, but you are Lady Adelaide's son, so you have every right to live in her home," he said. "And quite honestly, that's not a pleasant thought."

"I see. We're on the same page, then."

Our eyes met, and I found myself looking away first.

"Ever since I was young," I said. "I always wished Dr. Daniel was my father. You're now basically in the position my younger self once yearned for."

The silence that followed only ended once Margaret reappeared. As I sat waiting in the carriage, I saw through the small window that Margaret seemed to be a little flustered by Mark playing escort. She didn't seem to mind how close he was standing, but she didn't seem very good with direct expressions of affection either.

Margaret got into the carriage and sat diagonally opposite me. The carriage started moving.

"...You're blushing."

When I pointed that out, her eyes began to dart all over the place. She rested her basket in her lap and did her best to relax her expression. She must have been totally caught off guard by receiving a kiss on the back of her hand as a goodbye. Incidentally, I hadn't felt jealous seeing that, so this feeling couldn't be romantic love.

I had teased her a little, so I decided it was time to confess.

"I spoke with my mother," I said.

She turned her red face toward me and stared directly at me to the point that her gaze felt tangible. I looked at my right hand and lightly clasped it.

"...Thank you, Margaret."

That seemed to get my point across.

We said nothing else to one another on our way back to the estate, but Margaret's smile never once wavered.



LATER that night, a certain pupil of mine had stopped in the middle of cleaning up after being told, "Good for you."

"Am I really that easy to read?" Mark asked.

"It's not that," I responded. "You're good at everything you do, including being difficult to read, but Margaret seems to be an exception."

"...Is that so."

He tried to turn his face away, but the red tips of his ears gave away the fact that he was blushing. I pretended not to notice. Instead, I enjoyed finally seeing my boy grow up.

When I had first found him in that back alley, I never would have thought that he would ever be able to get close to someone, let alone express romantic interest in them.

"Well, to be honest, it seems pretty one-sided at the moment," Mark said.

"It's not like you to be so humble," I responded.

"I'm right, though, aren't I?" he insisted. "I'm definitely in deeper than she is."

I guess sometimes you can be too close to a situation to see what's right in front of you. I pulled out the last of the instruments from the disinfectant solution and shut them into a box, hiding my grin at Mark's very age-appropriate naivety.

"You know Margaret isn't the type to lie about her own feelings, right?" I asked.

"Doctor," Mark responded.

"Based on what I've heard, she wasn't very happy with her lover in her old world," I said. "Take care of her. If you make her

cry, Addie and Buddy will be hot on your tail.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice,” he said, then added, “And I bet you would be on my case just as bad.”

“And don’t you forget it.”

Mark took a deep breath and then smiled wryly as he put down his bag and looked at me.

“Doctor, I’ve finished with the final document,” he said. “I’ll go ahead with what we talked about. Is that okay?”

“It should be me asking *you* that,” I responded. “There’s nothing in it for you. I’m the only one who’s going to benefit.”

“It’s not about benefitting... I’m just incredibly grateful.”

He had a serious gaze. I could tell he was being honest with me, but even then, I still felt somewhat guilty.

“A mere provincial baron stealing the heir to the Royal Capital’s Count Disraeli.”

Ever since Mark decided to settle down in Miselle, I had raised the idea of me adopting him. I wondered when I had started seeing him as more than just someone to succeed me at the clinic... It may have very well been from the beginning.

He had been up for it from the start, but was keeping an eye on the family he’d become estranged from. It made me wonder why he chose this moment to finally move the proceedings along.

“As long as they are keeping out of my life, they’re quite the prestigious and talented family,” Mark said. “And anyway, I’ve never felt any love for the family name. If you hadn’t found me, I would have cut my ties long ago. Not to mention, I will never allow Margaret to be used by *that* family.”

At face value, Spirit Callers didn’t hold much political influence, but the larger continents tended to have important political figures who would be interested in them and try to use them for their own purposes. Margaret had hesitated even to receive a small amount of money, so when I thought about how she’d react to anything more than that, I couldn’t see it going well. She wanted to live her own life.

The existence of a Spirit Caller had already been made public, but the specifics were to be announced when Walter returned to the Royal Capital and reported his findings. A lot of people were trying their best to make sure that none of it affected Margaret, but—

“You don’t think it would be more advantageous for you to remain heir to a high-ranking count?” I asked.

"If we're talking about influence, I'd say the name Daniel Reynolds holds a lot more power. And while I'm not quite at that level yet, I have been building a foundation over the past few years," Mark responded. "I guess the rest is up to me."

Being beside someone who wasn't happy with only being protected made me want to try every avenue to push myself further. Mark no longer felt lost and was filled with resolve. I couldn't help but smile to see how much he had grown.

"...All right," I said. "When are you heading to the Royal Capital?"

"I'm planning to go along with Walter when he returns. I'll take a two-day break, if you don't mind."

When I said I didn't, a devilish smile appeared on Mark's face.

"I'll be returning as Mark Reynolds," he said with a grin. "And they don't accept cancellations."

"You'll look after me when I'm old, right?" I asked. "That's your role as my son, anyway."

As I said it, I reached out with my right hand. Mark opened his eyes wide, almost like he didn't know what to say.

"I'll look after you long before that... Dad."

Use your biggest strengths to protect people. It was easier said than done. I was proud of my son.

His handshake, which he used to hide his sheepishness, was quite firm.

Interlude: Hugh Tausend

“**HUGH!** Hugh Tausend,” a female voice called out to me. “What perfect timing!”

“Now, now,” I said, “am I so lucky as to be graced by the presence of the beautiful daughter of the marquis? You are truly glistening like the morning dew on a rose—”

“All right, all right, that’s enough,” she interrupted me. Even though I was complimenting her.

It was the morning after I had returned from Miselle and I had been summoned by my boss, the headmaster of the Magic Academy, first thing. I had been on my way back to my own research office after handing in my official report at the Royal Palace when I had bumped into the unmistakable marquis’s daughter in the palace’s corridors. Her blond curls were piled into a magnificent updo, and she was wearing a perfectly tailored luxurious dress.

“You can just call me Rachel, like always,” Lady Rachel said. “Hey, let me know all about you-know-who...the Spirit Caller.” Rachel said the last part of the sentence in a hushed voice, her violet eyes sparkling as she wore a carefree expression.

“...Lady Rachel, don’t you have something to do?” I asked.

“Yes, something with my father,” she replied. “But it’s fine! What happened in Miselle is more important.”

“I’ve just handed in my report. But the matter regarding the Spirit Caller is confidential, so I’m unable to share anything about it with you.”

“Aw, that’s too bad...”

In actuality, the only matters regarding the Spirit Caller that were confidential in this lady’s presence were related to magic.

Lady Rachel lowered both her hands dejectedly, looking disappointed. She could act like this publicly and still be known as the “Lady of the Golden Rose.”

It must be nice for nobles. Of course, I’d never admit that I think her title is a scam.

“Th-Then, how is Lord Walter?”

She composed herself and then lifted her head, but I could easily see that she was blushing. She was nervously fidgeting with her fingers in front of her chest. Her feelings had become increasingly obvious, and Walter was about the only one who hadn't noticed.

"I heard he reconciled with his mother after a long time, so I guess that can't be bad," I said. "And he seems to get along well with Margaret, the Spirit Caller."

"Wh-What k-k-kind of person is M-Margaret?" Lady Rachel stammered.

Lady Rachel, calm down. Even your maids are giving you exhausted looks.

"What kind of person... Hmm, I'd say she's cute—"

"Hugh Tausend," she interrupted me. "Let's have some tea in your research office. Let's do that. Come on, let's go."

Okay. It's not like I can say no, anyway. After all, a low-born staff member of the Magic Academy has to follow a noble's orders. Even if Lady Rachel's father is my acting guardian. Or wait, that's exactly why.

The lady's maids then grabbed me firmly by the arms and more or less dragged me out of the Royal Palace.



I didn't have any special tea leaves, but as expected of the incredibly talented maids serving a high-ranking noble, they were able to brew my ordinary tea in such a way that it ended up tasting completely different.

I had known one of the maids, Marie-Louise, for a long time, but she was always fiercely loyal to Lady Rachel. She was incredibly magically skilled to the point that she acted as both maid and bodyguard, which was what allowed Lady Rachel to move about so freely. I could see His Lordship's adoration for Lady Rachel in his decision to assign Marie-Louise to her.

Looking at the bluish drink in my cup, I was reminded of my time in Miselle. *That reminds me, Lady Adelaide said that a tea's preparation was more important than its quality. Her food was so delicious. How did she manage to make a salad taste that good? I don't even like vegetables.*

"Excuse me, Hugh," Lady Rachel's voice cut into my thoughts.

"You've had quite the dopey look on your face for a while now. What are you thinking about?"

"I was just thinking about how good the food in Miselle was."

"I see. So food is the way to your heart. What shall we do, Marie-Louise? I ought to get better at cooking!"

"Lady Rachel, please calm down," I said. "I ask that you do not cause any chaos in His Lordship's kitchens."

This small research room filled with junk was really no place for the daughter of a marquis. There was no place to stand, let alone sit.

As I was lost deep in thought, Lady Rachel sat down on the only available seat in the room and glared at me with her violet eyes.

"Hugh, you seem different," she commented.

"Oh...do I?" I responded.

"Yeah. Like you've been cleansed of an evil spirit. You're nicer than before."

That hit close to home. As expected from the daughter of a marquis. Lady Rachel, seemingly satisfied with my reaction, then elegantly raised her cup to her lips.

My parents had said the same thing. They had been so worried about me going to Miselle, but they were overjoyed when they saw me after I returned. Even though my magic had caused plenty of problems in the past, they'd never once complained.

I felt guilty before, but now I can understand what a luxury that was.

Strong magic wielders were usually isolated. It wasn't just that people felt threatened by their power, but also that when different people's magical powers interacted, it could cause physical and mental damage to weaker magic wielders.

I wore this cape as a shield, partly because if I couldn't hold back my own magical power, it would pour out of me in such a way that it would be akin to stabbing everyone around me with a sword. Ordinary people who weren't adept at using magic especially kept their distance. That was normal.

I had anticipated that Margaret, who had no magical ability whatsoever, wouldn't give off any magical interference or resonance, but I wondered just how much she had been hiding when she'd first taken my hand when we met. She may have just been oblivious to it, found my eyes—which had magic swirling

around in them—pretty, and simply been happy when she'd realized how useful magic was for cleaning. And the people of Miselle who had welcomed me back as if everything was okay—I wondered just how much they had forgiven me, too.

Seriously. I'm so happy that a Spirit Caller appeared in Miselle. And I'm glad that the Spirit Caller is Margaret.

Spirits regulated the world, and Callers acted as their assistants. *It may not be the world, but I believe her appearance was key to saving me, at least. Even if all she wants is to live a quiet life in Miselle.*

When I came back to my senses, Lady Rachel had silently placed her cup back on a saucer balanced in her lap.

"I want you to tell me all about the Spirit Caller," she said. "As much you can tell me, anyway."

"Hmm... She has lovely dark hair," I started. "She's twenty-six years old based on our calendars and is a talented cook. She's been helping out at Dr. Reynolds's clinic looking after children, and the children have really taken to her."

She said she had studied childcare in her world, but I wondered if she had a natural gift with children. When they were with her, they would stop crying and start playing with her instead, which I thought was amazing honestly. She would be incredibly popular if she did become a childminder.

"Twenty-six...four years older than me...so she'd be a good match for Walter," Lady Rachel assessed. "Plus, she's good at looking after children and cooking...so she'd make a great housewife."

"I think she's a calm, sweet girl," I noted.

Hey, don't look at me with such a tragic look on your face. None of this is even my fault, but Marie-Louise is glaring daggers at me anyway. Scary.

"...Okay," Lady Rachel finally said. "I'm going to ask you directly. How was she with Lord Walter?"

"Margaret isn't really the shy type," I explained, "so Walter seemed really relaxed around her."

"Lord Walter did?"

"Yeah, he helped with work in the garden and stuff."

They'd brought in a basket full of tomatoes that one morning, and there had been no doubt it was Walter's work.

"Count Dustin was gardening...?" Marie-Louise asked.

Even the maid was shocked. *I can understand why, though.*

"So, was Margaret, um, afraid of Lord Walter...? Y-You know, he's tall and he always has a slightly serious expression on his face," Lady Rachel said. "I find it wonderful myself, of course."

The fact that you're gushing over him so much really shows how rose-colored your glasses are, Lady Rachel! Saying his face is only "slightly serious"—just how strong is the filter of a woman in love? That glare of his could seriously take someone out in one hit.

Although, Margaret was really good at handling it. I wonder if salespeople in her world are just that strong? Or maybe she's just not very sma— Nah, that can't be it.

"Margaret wasn't bothered by it at all either," I said. "She greeted him normally from the first meeting."

"Greeted him normally?"

"Yeah, super normally. Oh yeah, and she had a really impressive bow, too."

Lady Rachel looked devastated. There weren't many marquis's daughters who needed their maids to cover their mouths for them.

Ah, yeah. We should put the cup back on the table. Don't want it to fall over.

"...Does Margaret have a husband or a lover from her past world?" Lady Rachel asked, sounding hopeful.

"They broke up a while ago, so she's single," I responded.

"What about someone in Miselle...?"

Maybe that young doctor? I think they get along well. If she turns him down, I'll comfort him the next time I see him.

"No idea," I finally answered. "I guess she's closest to Buddy."

"Buddy?"

"Lady Adelaide's dog."

Lady Rachel glared at me with tears in her eyes. *I swear, they really are super close.*

"...Okay," Lady Rachel said suddenly. "I'll be leaving now."

"Huh?"

"I think I'll have a better idea of what she's like if I meet her. I'm going to Miselle! Marie-Louise, notify my father immediately."

"Huh? Lady Rachel?"

Oh no, she's serious. Huh, really? Wait, she can't do that, right, Marie-Louise? Stop her already! Oh no, they're standing up. Ah, don't knock that pile over! There is some order to it, you know! Actually—

"Lady Rachel," I said. "I know I already mentioned this, but

Spirit Callers are incredibly important people. Even if you are the daughter of a marquis, they can't just let you force a meeting with the—*ah!*”

She poked me in the chest with a beautifully crafted folding fan she had seemingly conjured out of nowhere.

“...Hugh Tausend. Do you understand who you're speaking with? Or are you some sort of fool who doesn't even know who I am?” Lady Rachel smiled sweetly. She then laughed as she opened up her fan, elegantly covering the bottom half of her face.

How scary! This power...she went from being the mere daughter of a marquis to being a queen! Not to mention how skillfully she handles that fan!

“Hehe,” she giggled. “Don't get in my way. Lord Walter will be staying there for a few more days, right? I'll go visit him. I won't be going to see Miselle's Spirit Caller, I'll just be going to pick up Lord Walter from visiting his mother.”

“Lady Rachel, do you really think that incredibly aristocratic excuse will work on Walter?”

With that deflating statement from me, the queen I had just been speaking to had vanished and gone back to her usual princess self... *Is she all right? She's very up and down today.* I guess that was also the result of being a young maiden in love.

“I-I mean, I'm worried about him!” she complained. “I can't have just *anyone* falling in love with such a wonderful man! Not my Lord Walter...”

By “wonderful man,” could she really have meant Walter? Well, I suppose if she dated him, she would realize he's a good person and no longer have to worry.

Ah, since I haven't been here in a while, the floor is quite dirty. I wouldn't recommend sitting down on it.

That was the one thing that hadn't changed since she was young. Although she had been raised to act with the dignity of her station and was perfectly capable of doing so, around people she was close to, she more or less acted like a child. It was probably the result of the marquis spoiling her. And although she was of marriageable age, there had been absolutely zero mention of marriage or even matching her with someone.

As I was thinking about that, I noticed that her purple eyes were sparkling and filled with big tears.

“You've always been a crybaby,” I said. “You put the ‘Lady of

the Golden Rose' name to shame."

"I don't care about that name," she said through tears. "I just, I just want to be a woman worthy, *hic*, of Lord Walter..."

But you're already a highly sought-after noblewoman! Walter is just antisocial. I guess the effects of his separation from his ex-wife haven't worn off yet...

I had been shocked when I'd first heard they were getting married. Of course, they'd more or less been forced into it, so he had probably given up and found it hard to say no. They were both to be blamed for that.

If he had married Lady Rachel instead, I wondered how things would be right now. *I shouldn't be focusing on the past, though. I should be more worried about what's going to happen from here on out.*

I glanced at Lady Rachel, who was still crying.

"What are we going to do with you...?" I said, amused. "I have some good news for you, though, Lady Crybaby. I proposed two or three plans in my report that I submitted earlier, and I'll tell you about one of them."



“Wh-What is it?” Lady Rachel asked.

It was a coincidence, really. But Lady Rachel would probably be good for Margaret. I felt like the two of them would get along. Neither of them were the type to judge people by their appearances or status.

“There aren’t any single women Margaret’s age back in the village; there aren’t many young people at all, actually. Most everyone is married, so the only single women are almost ten years younger than Margaret. She’s hoping to come to the Royal Capital soon, and I thought it would be good if she had a friend who was close to her in age and knowledgeable about how things are done here.”

“Hugh, do you mean...”

“If you have the marquis suggest you as a candidate for that,” I continued, “don’t you think you’d have a good chance of meeting with her?”

Lady Rachel suddenly stood up, her eyes sparkling again, but for a different reason this time.

Nice. I knew this would work.

“Leave it to me!” she said excitedly. “I’ll definitely land the role, and I’ll be leaving tomorrow! Let’s go, Marie-Louise!”

Wait a minute. Tomorrow is impossible. Even if you’re quick about it, surely the earliest will be next week!

But I had vastly underestimated Lady Rachel’s determination and ability to negotiate. The marquis’s daughter darted out of the office, and by the next day, she was already on her way to Miselle.

Chapter 4: Jam, Cake, and the Daughter of the Marquis

I got a shock early in the morning when I received a letter that had been specially delivered for me. Apparently, a marquis's daughter would be coming from the Royal Capital to be my companion in Miselle...effective immediately. She would be here later today. I passed the letter to Lord Walter. He looked over it and an understanding expression came over his face.

"It's written here that she's only coming for a brief meeting this time, so she'll probably come to greet you then return to the Royal Capital," he said. "Hugh did say something about wanting to find you a companion around the same age, so I wonder if he has something to do with this. If he did, it seems he figured it would be best to do introductions while I was still here."

"Are you acquainted with her, Walter?" Lady Adelaide asked.

"I often meet with her father, Marquis Lindgren, at work, but I haven't spoken much with his daughter..." Lord Walter responded, bringing his hand to his chin as he remembered. "But somehow, I have the impression that she's a remarkable young woman."

Lady Adelaide looked apologetic. "It's been so long since I had any connection to the Royal Capital," she said.

But...the family of a marquis? Don't they have pretty high social standing? After the king came the duke, and a marquis came in third. The daughter of whom will be my companion?

I felt a little uneasy. I doubted my experience handling customers at a department store had taught me the appropriate etiquette for meeting a lady of this pedigree. If I did something rude without meaning to, it could cause problems for Lady Adelaide. But I was the only one panicking. Lord Walter and Lady Adelaide both seemed perfectly relaxed.

"You needn't worry," Lord Walter reassured me. "Your status is in its own category. You're on par with the king... No, you're even above that. And the marquis's daughter is a fine young lady, so don't be too worried about your meeting. If it goes well, you'll be

able to spend more time talking with her another day anyway.”

I don't need all that status.

Lord Walter patted me on the head as I pulled a dubious face. It was like he had heard what I was thinking.

When did this guy start treating me like a kid too? Ah, I give up.

“I hope you can become friends, Margaret. There aren’t many young women in Miselle, after all,” Lady Adelaide said with a smile.

She was right about that. There weren’t many young women in the area, and those who were my age were already married. But what would I even talk about with such a high-class lady?

I started to get cold feet, but then as I reread the letter, I noticed her name: Rachel Lindgren, daughter of Marquis Lindgren.

So close. If her name had been just a little different, it would have been the name of a character from my favorite book series. Naturally, that made me want to meet her.



I trusted Lord Walter and Lady Adelaide when they said I didn’t need to worry about our guest, so I carried on as always. The letter said she would be arriving with her own staff, so I had nothing to prepare outside of cleaning. I didn’t have to go to the clinic today either, so I headed into the fields before noon to remove some of the more obvious weeds, and there I met Mark, who had been gathering medicinal herbs in the back garden.

I was acting a little suspiciously because of what had happened the day before. It made me a little angry at Mark for acting so unconcerned now... Actually, that was a lie.

“You brought me some loquats from the woods? Yay, thank you! Huh, and an apricot? Oh, the forest has apricots too. A forest of treasures. Wow, I’m so happy!”

He had remembered I’d said I wanted these, even though that had been a while ago now.

“I’ll take you there once your foot is fully healed,” he said, “but for now, just enjoy these.”

His expression softened as he watched how overjoyed I was about the loquats and apricots. Then he put down the basket filled to the brim with yellow fruits and took off my straw hat.

He fixed my bangs with the same hand as usual, and I realized

he had always taken the same stance with me. I also realized I had started blushing, so I looked down, but then he placed his hand on my chin and made me look up at him.

My gloved hand, which was covered in soil from weeding, wasn't enough to stop Mark's hand from taking mine in his. He called my name and I gave in, made eye contact, and was practically blinded by his good looks.

Huh, wha—? Why is he so close? Hey, too close, we're outside, plus it's still morn—

“...Is Buddy here?” he whispered.

Why would he have gotten *that* close just to whisper *that*?!

“He’s here. Want me to call him?”

If only I could call for him! Buuuddy!

I glared at Mark, well aware that he was messing with me. But he looked so happy that I couldn't be mad at him.

“Unfair. I can't win against those eyes of yours.”

He laughed, apologizing and putting my hat back on my head. Then he stroked my cheek with his finger. Ah, honestly, I really couldn't win. My heart was thumping loudly, and I was just about to give in to my urges when Buddy came trotting over.

Even though I couldn't speak, my call seemed to have reached Buddy. Whenever I called for him in my mind, he always came, though I noticed his ears weren't moving, so it wasn't like he had heard a noise.

Strange.

Buddy made his way to my side. Mark then straightened his posture and asked Buddy if he could speak with him for a moment before leading him away. On the other side of the field, I saw Mark squat down and face Buddy at eye level.

I could barely make out what they were doing due to the distance. I couldn't even see their expressions. Realizing there was no reason to keep looking at what I couldn't see, I decided to finish the weeding. And a little while later, the two of them returned. I looked up at Mark to ask what had happened, and he casually informed me of what they had discussed.

“I told Buddy everything,” Mark said, “and now I seem to have his blessing.”

“Blessing? What blessing?”

“Is Lady Adelaide in the kitchen?” Mark asked.

“She is. But why?” I nodded in response to his question, even

though I didn't understand why he was asking. *Hey, what's with the bright smile?*

"I figured I should tell your guardians about us."

Wha? What. Whaaaaaat?!

"Dr. Daniel already knew, though."

...I wondered why he had gone to Buddy ahead of Lady Adelaide. When I told Lady Adelaide and Lord Walter about it later, they both laughed and said he had done the right thing. *But...why?*



I was using the sink outside to wash the apricots and loquats. Mark had talked with Lady Adelaide before heading back to the clinic, then coming outside to give me a kiss on the hand as a goodbye... but my hand was wet, so he'd done it on the inside of my arm instead. Wasn't he being a bit too touchy-feely? I was really embarrassed, but when he asked me if I didn't like it, I hadn't said no. It was just embarrassing, was all.

Afterward, Lady Adelaide had smiled and said, "I thought things were going in that direction."

It's so embarrassing. Ah, the cool water from the well feels good.

That reminded me, because Dr. Daniel was also acting as my guardian, it seemed he had received the same letter I had. He had never met Lady Rachel directly, but she had apparently met Mark before.

"She definitely had that 'daughter of a Marquis' feel about her," he had told me.

Mark had explained that he hadn't really spent time with her; it was more that they had been in the same room. *I've never met with the daughter of a marquis before, so I can't even imagine what she's like. A royal lady...* All I could imagine was what I had seen in movies, but I guessed I would figure it out when I met her.

I put the washed loquats away on the shelf near the eggs, and I still had some time before the guests arrived, so I began preparing the apricots.

I dried the apricots off and took out the remaining stems one by one. I had done similar work while making *umeshu*, a Japanese plum liqueur. I quite enjoyed the process. The satisfying feeling of popping the pits out of an apricot with a bamboo skewer or

toothpick was addictive. You could then crack the pit cleanly by inserting a knife vertically and twisting it in a circular motion. I took the kernels out, but kept the cores of the apricots in a bowl. There was a large quantity of half-peeled cores, so I would need around six to seven times more sugar to cover it.

Anyone could guess I'm making apricot jam. Hehe, it needs a lot more sugar than strawberry jam.

You can tell just from eating them, but apricots are different from plums in that their flavor is more pronounced when raw. Even then, there's still a hint of sourness. And, what was it? If there isn't enough pectin or enough salt, it won't harden. There are some recipes where you put in pectin, but I prefer to just put in a ton of sugar instead. It may seem like a startling quantity, but women have strong stomachs. You then wait for the liquid to come out and boil it.

I washed the kernels well and then dried them out. Like with *umeshu*, these could be made into a liqueur when paired with a high-sugar-content alcohol. Yes, *it's called amaretto.*

I wasn't aware of the correct way of making it, so I would often just let the seeds soak in vodka. *It's all right, the flavor is still there and it's delicious. You can dilute it with soda or juice, or pour it over an almond custard. It smells really nice.*

Apricots were very rarely available where I came from, so it was a win whenever I found them. I had bought miso, soy sauce, and oil that last time too, and I had been just about ready to cry having to carry it all home... *How nostalgic.*

It felt like a dream being able to gather them in a forest like this.

When I thought about it, loquats could be prepared in the same way. *You can also use the leaves to make beauty products. It's great that not even the leaves of fruit trees go to waste!*

Meanwhile, Lord Walter had left to continue his inspections. And because they only had a few tasks left over from the day before, he said he would be back just after lunchtime. He would be eating lunch with the village head, so it would be just Lady Adelaide and me at the mansion today.

All right, let's have loquats for dessert.



NOT long after lunch, Lord Walter returned as he had said...with the young lady from the Royal Capital. When he had been at the village head's house, the young lady had asked to see where Lady Adelaide's residence was. Lord Walter had been planning to return anyway, so he had offered to show her around and she had accompanied him back. When they arrived, I was in the kitchen with an apron that I hurriedly took off before rushing to the entrance hall.

Oh my, she looks like a porcelain doll. She had pearly white skin, with a perfectly symmetrical facial structure complemented by fine makeup. I could tell her dress was made from expensive silk just from looking at it. She had styled her gorgeous blond hair to match her clothes, and she had violet eyes hiding behind long lashes. She was the type to be kept hidden away in an imperial court.

Oh, we made eye contact. Wow, she smiled...ahh, she moved!

"It is wonderful to meet you, Lady Margaret, the Spirit Caller, and Lady Adelaide. I am—"

She greeted us with a lovely voice, and it even seemed like she had shortened her usual greeting so I would be able to understand it. *How kind of her.*

"—I sincerely apologize for pushing myself on you. Please allow me a small moment of your time," she said with a small bow.

It was such a polite bow, and her maid behind her bowed in sync. *How perfect. A true display of synchronization.* Worried about how hastily we'd had to prepare for her visit, I bowed like Lady Adelaide had taught me.

"Ah, you don't need to be so formal," Lady Adelaide said. "Please, come on in. Margaret, don't forget your magical writing device!"

Lady Rachel had maintained direct eye contact with me as she smiled, so I smiled back. As I did so, her pale cheeks flushed a little and her gaze wavered a bit. *Ah, how cute.*

I was grateful to Lord Walter for taking her to the living room we always used and not the guest parlor. When I started for the kitchen, Lady Adelaide urged me to go and see Lady Rachel instead, because she was my guest. She said she would take care of preparing the tea and seeing to the driver.

I would have preferred to sit on a different sofa, but because I needed Lady Rachel's palm or my magical device to communicate, I excused myself and sat right next to her. She seemed to have

understood what I needed and had left a space open next to her. I felt a little relieved to realize I hadn't made her feel uncomfortable. Well, Lady Adelaide and Lord Walter had both said that it would be fine, so I wasn't that worried, but I was still being careful.

It was pointless to compare myself to her. I felt like a little *kokeshi* doll sitting next to the statue of a goddess. I thought she was a little too pale, though; even up close, her skin was like porcelain. In my head, I automatically decided on the perfect shade of foundation for her skin. *Occupational hazard.*

She leaned toward me, showing her bright smile. "Once again, it is lovely to meet you," she said. "Please call me Rachel. The maid opposite us is Marie-Louise. We are pleased to make your acquaintance."

She's too cute!

She was no doubt so elegant and serene because she was such a high-ranking noble, but I sensed no malice coming from her. Her maid seemed to be around the same age as me. Her dark brown hair was neatly tied up, and she had a serious but kind face. She seemed like she'd make a good chairwoman or something like that. Pretty reliable.

"Because you are a Spirit Caller, I would usually treat you with the utmost courtesy, but I heard you are not fond of such formalities," Lady Rachel said. "If it's not too rude, I would ask that you allow me to speak with you like Hugh does."

"*What's Hugh got to do with it?*" I wrote doubtfully onto the magical writing device.

"Ah," said Lord Walter, who was sitting in an armchair next to me before continuing on to explain. "Lady Rachel's father is Hugh's guardian. It's been that way since he entered the Magic Academy, so for quite a while now."

"I've known him since I was a child," Lady Rachel added.

Anyone with magical talent could enter the Royal Capital's Magic Academy, but it was mainly nobles who had magical talent. There were a few low-born students, but there was a gap between them and the nobility, so to avoid any friction or trouble, it seemed it was common for nobles to act as guardians for those students. I guessed there was some meaning to having students enroll early in their lives, too.

Hearing of Hugh's connection to Lady Rachel, I could understand why she had been chosen for this role. *If she's used to*

him, then I can probably relax around her a little. I felt some of the tension in my shoulders dissolve.

First of all, I asked that she stop referring to me as “Lady,” and then we chatted a little using the magical writing device. Lady Adelaide brought us some tea, which she had prepared along with Marie-Louise. It was delicious, as always. We ate some adorably small baked sweets. Both our hearts and our mouths were pleased, so the conversation flowed smoothly.

Lady Adelaide brought up topics to help move everything along, and I’d had absolutely no idea that even Lord Walter could be this sociable. It was surprising. He was wearing less of a somber expression now, and he had even begun to talk more.

Although he is relying a lot on harmless pleasantries, he is capable of conversation. But, now I think about it, of course he is. He is the prime minister’s assistant, after all.

It seemed Lady Rachel had left the Royal Capital early in the morning. It had only been an hour since she had arrived in Miselle, but she had plans to return soon, so she had already started preparing her things to go. That was surprising.

Although we were a ways away from the Royal Capital, she should have had enough time to make a day trip, do some shopping, and then head back, but I guessed it had taken longer. When Dr. Daniel and Mark had gone to the Royal Capital, it hadn’t taken them a long time. Both Lady Adelaide and Lord Walter seemed confused as well, so Mary-Louise explained: “Lady Rachel often gets motion sick. We can’t go very fast, so it takes a lot longer than usual.”

“Oh, don’t say that, Marie-Louise,” Lady Rachel said. “I’m fine if we go slow.”

I had struggled with motion sickness when I was younger, so I could understand how miserable it was. I now knew why she looked so pale—it was because she wasn’t feeling well.

“You’re no doubt exhausted,” Lady Adelaide said. “If it’s all right with you, would you like to stay here for the night? Then tomorrow you’ll have more time to make your return trip.”

It was a good suggestion. Doing such a quick round-trip wouldn’t only be hard on the young lady, but it would also be hard on the driver and the horse. Lady Rachel went red in the face, turned to her lady-in-waiting, and began to panic.

“Uh, uhm, but you already let me come visit, I don’t want to

burden you any further by staying!" she said.

"If you need anything, you can just borrow it from me," Lady Adelaide offered. "I can't give you much in the way of hospitality, but since you already made the effort to come all this way, please feel free to stay. It would be awful if you pushed yourself too hard and became ill."

"That's right," Lord Walter agreed. "If I send a letter to Marquis Lindgren, it should arrive by tonight. Plus, you wanted to talk with her a little more, right, Margaret?"

"That's right."

Although I was worried about Lady Rachel's condition, I also wanted to talk with her more. She was clearly a noble young lady, but she didn't seem to be on a high horse at all. She was friendly, easy to talk to, and fun. And although her relationship with Marie-Louise was technically that of a superior and a subordinate, they felt more like friends or even sisters. *She seems like a nice girl.*

Lady Rachel seemed a little hesitant, but Marie-Louise agreed with the suggestion, so they ended up staying the night.



FATHER'S horse-drawn carriage was incredibly elegant and comfortable. You could have ridden in it for ten hours straight without any issues. You could have asked ten people about it, and all ten people would have said it was a fine ride. However, I was the outlier.

"M-Marie-Louise, could we go a little slower..." I groaned.

"Of course, Lady Rachel. We'll soon arrive at our last rest stop."

"Okay, thank you..."

The inside of the cabin was packed. I reclined on a wide seat that was just a little more comfortable than a sofa. I would never have let my father see me lying limp and gasping for air like this.

The cabin had been designed with comfort in mind, and specifically my comfort. I was grateful for my father's affection and his unreasonable demands that had brought the design team to the point of tears, but unfortunately, it was hard for me to say it helped at all.

Even though I knew all about my motion sickness, I was the

one who had pushed for a day trip to Miselle. Very quickly, I felt like I had done something reckless. My maid, who had been with me for ten years, kept looking at me like she wanted to say, "I told you so," but it was just like her to only express that with her eyes and not actually say it. I couldn't *not* take this trip, after all.

We took one more break before we got to Miselle. I felt a little better thanks to that, but when we went to ask for the location of Count Dustin's estate, I felt my breath stop as soon as I saw Lord Walter.

He would be riding with us as he showed us around. I tried my best not to get sick, and though I felt slightly ill again, it was for different reasons this time, and I made sure that none of it was visible in my expression. The trip was short, but it felt longer. I tried my best to maintain my composure. Marie-Louise was looking at me like I was a difficult child, but at least I seemed to be doing better than expected.



EVEN though I had been officially appointed as a companion for the Spirit Caller, it really hadn't been that difficult to get the position. She was on the same level as a noble and we were relatively close in age.

Not to mention that it still had yet to be officially announced that there even *was* a Spirit Caller, and the Royal Palace was keeping that information under tight control as they gathered more information. That had worked very well in my favor. For example, the person who had been sent to Miselle to investigate first had been none other than Hugh, who was under the guardianship of the Lindgren house.

Although I was of marriageable age, I had no plans to marry yet, and both my father and older brother had given me permission to go, so I was freely able to visit Miselle. However, I had unfortunately needed to turn down a number of people who wanted to accompany me. Marie-Louise and my driver, Roy, were enough.

I was extremely aware of how Lord Walter viewed me: as the daughter of his boss. The age difference between Lord Walter and me alone should really have been enough for me to give up on any ideas of marriage, but it was difficult to give up on such a

complicated first love.

Before his wedding and after his divorce, I had found myself constantly vexed by the fact that he only saw me as a well-behaved unmarried woman. I was probably totally off the mark when it came to my suspicions about Lord Walter and the Spirit Caller, but I couldn't help but be curious...

Plus, I was actually really looking forward to meeting the Caller, whom not even the royal family had been able to meet yet.

My dreamlike journey all of a sudden came to an end. The carriage stopped just a short distance away from the center of the village. Our destination was an estate that was charmingly solid yet also looked to be full of history, standing against a green backdrop.

When we announced our presence in the entryway, two women appeared from deeper inside the mansion. The older, refined woman was no doubt Lord Walter's mother. By the time I had begun to participate in high society, his mother had already left the Royal Capital, so this was my first time meeting her.

I had heard rumors that she dressed in a very old-fashioned style, but she wore it wonderfully. It didn't seem out of place at all. Compared to the older women in the Royal Capital, who tried to make themselves appear younger, Lady Adelaide looked a lot more elegant.

The Spirit Caller, Lady Margaret, slowly appeared behind her. She was slender, had eyes of two different colors, and had silky black hair that was loosely tied up. I could see two round pearl earrings hidden behind her hair. They were quite impressive.

They probably hadn't expected me to arrive with Lord Walter, so both of them looked quite surprised. I bowed apologetically over my sudden intrusion, and just as Hugh had said, Lady Margaret responded with a proper bow.

I was charmed by her soft features. I would have described her as pretty in her own way, though somewhat plain, but even then, her smile was so alluring... I felt like she wasn't hiding anything, nor did she make me feel at all apprehensive. I wanted to get to know her better. I understood what Hugh had meant when he had described her as cute.

She also had an indescribable aura around her of comfort. I didn't know if that was because she was a Caller, or just because of who she was as a person, but I decided not to worry about that.

What was important was that the person who was here before

me was Lady Margaret. I realized that during our conversation after moving to the living room.



I began to feel better after drinking some tea and chatting, but in the end, it was decided that I would stay the night anyway. Lady Adelaide and Margaret left me in the living room, saying I should relax while they fixed up my room. They left Lord Walter behind to keep me company.

I was very grateful that they were offering to let me stay in their home, but there were no live-in maids here, and I heard that they only had two part-time staff members who came a few times each week. I felt awful that I was causing more work for them. Lady Adelaide and Margaret even lightly rejected Marie-Louise's offer to help with the room, instead asking for her to make herself at home, too.

Even Lord Walter had told me not to worry about it.

"They already had this room prepared for when Hugh and I visited, so it's absolutely no issue for them," he said. "As you can see, it's different from a marquis's estate, but it should be no problem for you to stay here for one night."

"Furniture-wise, yeah," I agreed. "My grandmother had a vacation home near the ocean, and it was similar to this place. I loved going there. I would have liked to have been able to help out, though... I feel like I'm causing them trouble."

That said, this almost felt like a dream, being able to talk to Lord Walter like this. *We'll be sleeping under the same roof. Oh my. Will I even be able to sleep?*

"My lady, allow me to get you another cup of tea," Marie-Louise said.

"Okay, thank you."

This is no good. I need to get it together. Nice timing, Marie-Louise.

And now, I have something I need to confirm. I crossed my hands on my lap and tried to regain my composure.

"Um..."

"Yes?" Lord Walter said. He looked at me very directly, which made it more difficult for me to ask what I wanted.

"...Margaret seems like a nice person," I started. "Lady

Adelaide seems to be entirely open with her.”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “Don’t you think they act like mother and daughter?”

“I do,” I said. “Plus...you seem quite close to her too, Lord Walter.”

It was true. He spoke to her with warmth and kindness. They seemed polite with each other but also casual. I had no recollection of him ever being that way, even with his ex-wife back when they had been together and I had seen them at my father’s residence.

Even now. When he talked about Margaret, his manner of speaking became a lot gentler. I realized he was treating her like a woman who was important to him, and that made my heart hurt. I wondered if I was even properly smiling anymore.

Ever since I had first met him, I had never had the chance to speak with him for so long and on such a familiar level. *I should probably be satisfied that I was able to talk to him like this at all.*

“Yeah...hm, I guess, I feel like I’ve got a younger sister now,” Lord Walter laughed.

“A...younger sister?”

Did he just say “younger sister?” Younger sister. I stared at my right hand as Lord Walter continued to speak.

“I didn’t get along with my mother for the longest time,” he started. “Or rather, it was me who was purposely keeping a distance from her. When Margaret came here, it led to me finally coming for a visit...and well, to sum it up, it’s all thanks to her that I was able to rekindle my relationship with my mother.”

“Oh, I...I’m sorry,” I said quickly. “I didn’t mean to pry.”

“It’s all right,” he said. “I should apologize for bringing up such a shameful story.”

Around the time Lord Walter had gotten divorced, I had once overheard his ex-wife talking badly about Lady Adelaide. I had thought she was idiotic for doing so back then, too. If Lord Walter’s relationship with his mother had already soured so long ago, I couldn’t imagine how difficult it would have been for them.

“Margaret often says she was saved by my mother,” Lord Walter continued, “but I believe that, in a way, we’re the ones who owe her. Putting aside the fact that she’s a Spirit Caller, I want to make sure she gets what she wants in life. If she says she wants to remain here, then I will do my best to protect her ability to do that.”

“...Do you not intend to marry her?” I asked.

I had ended up asking the question plaguing my thoughts, and there was no way to take back the words that had more or less fallen out of my mouth. I had already decided not to ask it, but in the end, my true emotions came out. I regretted having been so brazen, but there was no turning back now.

However, though Lord Walter seemed a little startled, he didn't seem annoyed at all.

“Certainly not,” he replied. “I'm not suited for marriage.”

“But, it's not your fault, Lord Walter! That was *her* fault...”

“Lady Rachel...?”

Once I came back to my senses, I apologized. I wasn't the one who had been hurt in that situation. I had no right to be upset on his behalf.

“I-I'm sorry for being so rude...,” I said quickly. “Uh...um, I... don't think you're not suited for marriage, Lord Walter. I mean, you've always been so kind to me, ever since I was a little girl...”

“Ah, you still remember?” he asked. “That was such a long time ago now.”

“I still remember,” I said decisively. “It's an important memory. I don't think I'll ever forget it.”

Back when I was really young, my first time in the Royal Capital's main city area, I had gotten too excited and ended up separated from my maid. Naturally, I had gotten lost. Lord Walter, who at the time had been a knight and was patrolling the streets, had been the one to find me. He had just happened to bump into me.

I had fallen over in a deserted alley and hurt myself. I had been crouched over in pain when Lord Walter gently picked me up, and then he had made arrangements with other people and even had my injury treated immediately.

I had been raised in a marquis's family and had been spoiled by both my parents as well as the other adults in my life, so as a result, I was very sheltered, and I wasn't very good at discerning right from wrong. That had been my first time ever being scolded by someone, but when Lord Walter had patted me on the head, it had been a different warmth from that of my father. I'll never forget the strength in his arms as he picked me up.

I had then noticed that his face wasn't that scary, and that he had kind eyes. He had interacted with his attendants and

subordinates casually. Whenever I learned more about him, my affection grew.

Lord Walter smiled wryly, his expression troubled. "I find it amusing that you remember that as me being kind, even though I was a large man scolding a little lady," he said.

"My life was in danger," I replied. "I'm thankful that you worried about me. I had no sense of danger back then."

It seemed he hadn't expected my reply.

"...I never thought about it like that," he said. "All I remember is scaring you."

"Not at all..." I said. "I'm sorry about this. I've troubled you."

"No..."

At that moment, Lady Adelaide called out to let me know that my room had been prepared, stopping Lord Walter from saying whatever he had been about to say.

I was so glad I had been able to speak to him so much. I felt myself grinning. Not to mention, he referred to Margaret as his "little sister."

Marie-Louise, you're smiling too much too!



I was led to a warm, refreshing room. Instead of being impressed by the quality and size of the room, I was instead drawn to its carefully made furniture and the linens that were perfectly suitable for early summer. In such a short period of time, Lady Adelaide had prepared some flowers for decoration and gotten everything ready so I would be able to write a letter.

Marie-Louise and Roy were also given rooms, and they were unable to hide how pleased they were at how well prepared they were.

Lady Adelaide smiled when I expressed my heartfelt gratitude. "We have plenty of rooms," she said. "After you've written your letter home, how about resting until dinner is prepared?" I thought that would be a waste, so I asked if it would be okay if I stayed close to Margaret.

I wouldn't get in her way. I just wanted to spend time with her. Even though she couldn't speak, I could understand a lot from her writing and her facial expressions, so it never caused any issues.

I felt so warm and fuzzy when she smiled at me...

I had read a novel before about two women who had a strong friendship, but...it was different from that. *Yeah. We're not like that.*

Margaret happily agreed to let me accompany her, then informed me she'd be making jam. I managed to overcome Marie-Louise's opposition and I was able to help. It was so fun.

At my father's residence, I was never allowed in the kitchen. So since I couldn't do a lot, Margaret asked me to stir the apricots so they wouldn't burn.

The fruit slowly changed into liquid in the pan. The vivid orange color, the refreshing, sweet and sour smell... Once we put it in a jar, it looked like a jam you would see being sold in the Royal Capital.

Margaret transferred the leftover jam to a small plate and brought out some rolls.

She then lightly warmed the rolls in the oven and divided the spread into three: one for me, one for her, and one for Marie-Louise. She put some butter on each roll, then spread some of the warm apricot jam on top. I ate mine in one bite...and then I stood perfectly still, forgetting all my manners. I was too preoccupied with making sure I didn't drool from how delicious it was. When Marie-Louise put her own roll in her mouth, her usually calm eyes grew so big I thought they might fall out of her eye sockets.

I think I deserve to be praised for remembering my noble upbringing well enough to stop myself from dancing.

Naturally, I was unable to help prepare dinner. I sat at the table in the kitchen, petting Buddy, the dog I had heard so much about, as I watched Margaret and Lady Adelaide cook together. Lord Walter stood beside me too, and we were able to have a casual conversation. For some reason, today I was able to talk to him so easily. Usually, I had to try my hardest even to greet him.

I was so happy and having so much fun. I felt like I was in a dream.

The ladies worked fast as they assembled dish after dish, but it didn't seem like they were in a rush. And although I couldn't hear her voice, it almost seemed like Margaret was singing as she cooked. She really seemed to be enjoying herself.

Lord Walter said he would help set the table, because he had invited guests to join us for dinner when he had gone to send the letter to my father.

“Good evening,” the first guest said. “Has your nausea subsided at all?”

“Y-Yes. It’s lovely to meet you,” I replied. “I’m Rachel Lindgren. Thank you for helping my grandfather that time.”

It was Dr. Daniel Reynolds, the former head physician of the medical department at the Royal Palace. Even now, there had yet to be another doctor in the department who could surpass him in skill. He had longed for retirement and settled in Miselle, but I had heard countless tales about how he had saved my grandfather’s life in the past.

“It was thanks to your father trying his hardest that we cured his illness,” Dr. Reynolds replied. “I only helped a little.”

“Not at all,” I insisted. “The reason my grandfather was able to live such a long life was thanks to you, doctor. My father often still says that.”

“Is that so?” Dr. Reynolds asked, chuckling lightly. He seemed like a trustworthy gentleman, just as I had often heard.

Once we had finished exchanging greetings, his pupil went straight over to Margaret... Mark Disraeli. I had heard a lot about this man who was only two years older than me.

He was said to be a member of the prestigious Disraeli family. Although he was an illegitimate child, he had gotten all the good parts from his lineage. He was talented in the magical arts as well as combat, had remarkable intelligence, and was blessed with good looks. Despite being blessed from birth, he had kept people at arm’s length, preferring to keep to himself as he scared off others with his sharp, frigid gaze. I had to wonder if I was looking at the same man now.

“...Hey, Marie-Louise,” I asked. “Isn’t this even sweeter than the jam we just had?” I asked, referring to the scene I watched play out between Mark and Margaret.

“I agree, Lady Rachel. There’s no hint of sourness.”

He stood near the kitchen counter, making sure to keep the perfect distance that didn’t interfere with Margaret’s cooking, but didn’t take him too far from her either. Whatever he was talking about caused Margaret’s face to turn red... I wondered if she knew how overjoyed she looked, though there was some distress mixed in too.

Lord Walter struck up a conversation with Dr. Reynolds, acting like the scene between Mark and Margaret was an everyday,

accepted occurrence here. *I see, so Hugh left out some information.*

"I've only seen him a few times before. People sure do change," Marie-Louise said. "Plus, a gentleman who doesn't take a second glance at you is a rare and precious thing."

"What are you suggesting, Marie-Louise..." I sighed, exasperated.

I'm only interested in one man, and attracting his interest alone is enough for me.



"WE all eat together," Lady Adelaide said, urging Marie-Louise and Roy to sit at the table with us. She really wasn't like other nobles. My grandmother was similar, so I wasn't particularly opposed to it, but Lady Adelaide had no doubt found it difficult to get by in the high society life of the Royal Capital.

Here, though, it felt so natural. No matter who you looked at, when your eyes met, you would smile while enjoying a peaceful dinner together.

Everyone but Margaret had accepted a straight alcoholic drink before dinner. Margaret had diluted hers down with juice, which helped calm Marie-Louise and Roy's nerves a little so they could enjoy dinner. Mark—I had called him Lord Disraeli at first, but he had told me, with a troubled expression, that he would prefer it if I didn't use his family name—teased Margaret, even though she protested using body language. She was older than he was, but she acted so cute, and I ended up cheering her on internally.

I often had the chance to dine with a variety of people, but nothing could hold a candle to the taste and atmosphere of tonight's dinner.

We had beautifully orange-colored smoked salmon—which had apparently arrived just today—paired with a fragrant salad made of leafy greens from the fields outside. It went wonderfully with the citrus oil dressing. There were lightly boiled green beans, plain rolls, and toast with sliced tomato and parsley. The sweet vinegar on the cabbage also worked as a palate cleanser.

Lord Walter's favorite cold potato soup had been passed through a sieve, so it had an incredibly smooth texture. We also had loquat compote for dessert, a sponge cake with thick whipped

cream, and a trifle loaded with different fruits...

Although I was familiar with everything on the menu, it felt like I was eating it all for the first time—I was so surprised by how fresh and delicious everything was. I was sitting near Lord Walter, but I ended up eating a lot anyway.

What if he thinks I'm a glutton? B-But, it's so delicious, I can't stop myself. I hoped Marie-Louise would understand my plight. I looked at her with tears in my eyes, and she replied with a strong nod.

"While I have no complaints regarding our own chefs...I want them to study under you," I said. "Hugh really wasn't kidding when he said the food was delicious here."

"Well, I'm happy if you enjoyed it," Lady Adelaide replied, smiling and glancing at Margaret. "Hugh seemed to enjoy his food as well; he certainly ate a lot."

All of the once-full plates that had covered the table were now empty, their contents safely tucked away in our stomachs.

Lady Adelaide wasn't fond of magical devices, and even in the kitchen, she only had old-fashioned equipment. Even then, though, she had been able to make so much in so little time... I wondered how she did it. Suddenly, the kitchens at my father's lavish residence didn't seem so appealing.

Even though I had, uncharacteristically, eaten quite a lot, I didn't feel at all bloated as we enjoyed after-dinner tea; rather, I felt content. Roy and Marie-Louise both retired to the living room while I enjoyed my tea in the kitchen.

Margaret had been acting perfectly normal right up until it was time to clean up. Now, she was sitting in front of the fireplace, practically hugging Buddy as she pet him, laughing to herself with her cheeks flushed red. *Is she drunk?* Her drink had been diluted with juice, and it was an apple liqueur that wasn't even that strong anyway to begin with.

It wasn't unusual for her to be so full of smiles, but now she seemed vulnerable as well. I felt like I was looking at something I shouldn't—and even though we were both women, my heart was beating fast.

"Oh, Margaret, are you drunk again?"

"...I guess we can't even dilute it down enough for you."

Dr. Reynolds placed a hand on her forehead to check her temperature, which caused Margaret to lean her cheek toward him and narrow her eyes. If his pupil hadn't been behind him ruining

the scene, it would have made for an adorable father-daughter tableau.

Mark, it's not very flattering to be so jealous of your superior.

It turned out that Margaret couldn't handle her alcohol. Although she denied it herself, she wasn't very convincing, given how she was acting right now. Mark was worried about Margaret's leg and repeatedly told her to take care on the stairs as he escorted her back to her room. She sobered up quite quickly and got off with only a warning, but if she hadn't, I didn't doubt that Mark would have carried her up the stairs in his arms.

It seemed that the injuries Margaret had sustained when she had first arrived in Miselle had been quite serious. The two doctors had vivid memories of her injuries. It seemed one of her legs had yet to completely heal, but it was quite obvious to me that they were being too careful with her. I started to wonder if it was coming less from a place of concern and more from a place of affection, but I decided not to worry too much about that.

"There's a difference of a year or two between how we count years. In my former world, I was twenty-eight," Margaret wrote with a defeated expression. Marie-Louise, who had concluded that they were the same age, gave her a firm handshake. Margaret looked about my age, around twenty-two...but in her former world she had been twenty-eight. *I see...*

Although it was still early, Margaret and Lord Walter both said that they would retire to bed early in order to prepare for the morning. *I wonder what's happening tomorrow?* I thought it was a little strange, but I was also exhausted from all the travel that day, so I asked for some hot water and retired to bed myself.

"Hey, Marie-Louise," I asked on the way. "I was in the Royal Capital this morning, right?"

"What's wrong, my lady?"

"I feel like I'm in a different world right now. It's so comfortable here... I just want to keep being who I get to be while I'm here."

I wondered if it was because I was away from high society and the Royal Capital. Neither Lady Adelaide nor Margaret had put on airs with me or judged me hastily. Although they knew I was the daughter of a powerful marquis, they had talked to me and laughed with me like I was my own person. I could be myself and respond how I wanted. It was so comfortable.

While I couldn't deny the benefits that came from my high status, it did make me feel a little lonely. There were certain expectations based on my title and my appearance, and with those came disappointment. But here, it seemed I could be accepted for everything I was, good and bad, and not just my family name and how I looked. Relationships where I didn't have to feign ignorance or try to figure out someone's intentions... People who already have those sorts of relationships have no idea how hard it is to find something like that.

Marie-Louise seemed to understand as she nodded along. "I talked about the same thing with Roy," she said. "Even though it was the horses' first time being here, they were relatively calm. Everyone here is so kind, too... It's strange, isn't it? I wonder if this is the effect of a Spirit Caller."

"I'm not sure. That's never been mentioned in any of the books I've read," I said.

"Even you were able to have a normal conversation with your beloved Walter Dustin!"

"D-Don't be mean!"

"You had a lot of fun today, I know," she said. "But your body is exhausted, so please get some sleep."

Marie-Louise had a calm smile on her face as she covered me in the soft, thick blanket. The sheets were soft and the bed was perfectly firm. There was a faint herbal smell coming from the linens, too.

Hey, Marie-Louise. Spirit Callers may not have any magic, but I feel like Miselle is covered in magic...

I slowly drifted off to sleep. And the next day...

Those birds are so darn loud—ahem, I mean, they are a lot louder than I imagined.



"...GOOD morning."

I had hoped I would be able to greet the morning quietly, but the birds did not care for human affairs. I wondered if Lady Rachel was surprised by the unique wake-up call. I hoped she had been able to rest properly.

As I headed out to get some eggs and vegetables, I saw Roy

near the outdoor water source. It seemed he was drawing water to give to the horses. When he saw me, he stopped and smiled.

"The birds?" he said in response when I asked if they woke him up. "I was born in the countryside, so I'm used to it. Plus, I always wake up around this time anyway."

"That's a relief."

It turned out that Roy had been a classmate of Hugh's. Roy specialized in defensive magic and had seemed promising, so he was hired as a personal bodyguard for Marquis Lindgren.

As he was about to go tend to the horses, I mentioned that I wanted to see them, so he took me with him. Lady Adelaide didn't own any horses, but her estate did have a stable. Now there were two chestnut-colored horses in the stable that was usually empty. They were eating breakfast.

Oh, Buddy is here too... I thought Buddy was big, but he's tiny next to the horses.

He looked so adorable. When he noticed I was there, he plodded over to me, and as I was petting him, we made sure to keep our distance while we watched Roy take care of the horses. As I looked on with great interest, he said I could come pet them. My heart was pounding as I moved my hand toward the neck of one of the horses, feeling the velvety soft hair. I could feel its body temperature more directly than that of a dog or a cat, as well as the graceful movements of its muscles. It had moist, dark eyes.

Even though the horses were so large, they were somehow also both cute and elegant... I must have looked like I was quite enamored by them, because Buddy pulled on my skirt a little, bringing me back down to earth, while Roy warmly looked on.

Ah, how embarrassing.

Buddy seemed to be sulking, so I hid my embarrassment by giving him a hug and ruffling his fur, which seemed to lift his spirits.

"Because Lady Rachel suffers from motion sickness when we travel by carriage, I made sure to bring some of the tamer horses with me, but they seem very relaxed here compared to anywhere else. I wonder if it's because the forest is nearby."

Ah, I know how they feel. The closer I am to the forest, the calmer I feel. I was glad the horses had come to like my favorite place. Hugh had said that he wasn't sure if it was due to the magic coming from the forest or not, but it was apparent that it relaxed everyone.

There were a lot of hills there, though, so it wasn't easy to traverse. I hadn't had a chance to venture into the forest yet with my leg still recovering.

I wrote into Roy's palm, "*We'll have breakfast soon, so once you're finished come eat with us,*" and then I left the stable behind.

As I returned to the kitchen, everyone was...already gathered there? "*Oh, my apologies, did I keep you all waiting?*"

"Good morning, Margaret," Lady Rachel said. "Were you outside?"

She looked closely at the eggs and vegetables I was holding. *Ah, did she want to come too?*

"There's still a while until breakfast," Lady Adelaide said. "I think the blueberries should be about ready now. Could you go and pick some for me?" She must have realized the same thing I just had.

Lady Rachel's eyes lit up. *She's so cute.*

We prepared a basket and a sieve, and I headed out again—yes, this time with Lord Walter as well. I handed him the basket as a way of inviting him, and he seemed surprised, but he did come along. I signaled to Marie-Louise with my eyes, and she clenched her fist in response, so we quietly walked together behind Lady Rachel and Lord Walter.

We looked at each other and nodded. *I mean, come on, it's obvious.* I had only known Lady Rachel for less than a day, but even I could see how she felt about him. Why hadn't Lord Walter realized? *Is he dum—...no, no.*

We arrived at the blueberry patches, which grew in the fields near the forest. I kept stealing small glances at Lady Rachel, who was acting all bashful around Lord Walter. The blueberries had turned a deep color and were ripe, so we split up the workload and got moving.

Naturally, I sent those two to the same blueberry bush. As they were working together, they wouldn't notice how physically close they were, and they would be able to chat naturally. Even if they had nothing to talk about, it wouldn't be that awkward, because they would both be busy doing something...

Wait, why do I sound like an old lady trying to arrange a marriage?

I looked over at them, and Lady Rachel still acted a little shy, but they seemed to be having fun talking as they started berry

picking. *Well, I guess I'll get started too.*

Usually, blueberries would end up getting eaten by birds. However, birds rarely came here. There must have been way more blueberries in the forest, so they didn't have to go out of their way to eat these. I was glad we had such an abundant forest nearby.

There was a long string tied to the gathering basket that I had attached myself so I could wear it around my waist, which gave me full use of both hands. After all, it was important to gather the small berries quickly, right? I felt like a gatherer by trade.

"Um, Margaret? You've gathered so many already! Good work," Lady Rachel said.

"You're so quick..." Lord Walter sounded astonished.

I guess we're finished... Actually, yeah. I have more than double everyone else. I chuckled to myself as we headed home.

We didn't have enough to make jam, but we had enough to make some sweets. *For now, I'll add these to our morning yogurt.*



ALTHOUGH she was reluctant to go, Lady Rachel and her entourage would be heading back to the Royal Capital before lunch. As a souvenir to give her before she left, I decided to make some baked goods using the blueberries we had gathered that morning.

Lady Rachel was already fully accustomed to our kitchen, and she offered to help me make them. It felt a little strange having the person who the gifts were *for* offer to help make them, but it would probably make for a good memory, everyone baking together in the kitchen, so I ended up accepting her help after all. *It can be so fun and addicting when you first start baking sweets, after all.*

I thought about what we should make and eventually decided on a few simple pound cakes. I could put a lot of blueberries in them, but they would take less time to bake than a pie, while being equally delicious.

Pound cake is really easy to make; you just put the ingredients in one by one and mix.

I started to give Lady Rachel instructions as we cooked together.

"First, you put milk and sugar into a bowl, then add eggs—huh, what's that? You've never cracked an egg! O-Okay, then we'll start from

there. We'll crack it into another bowl for now. First you hit it until there's a small crack, then you crack it with both hands... Oh, it went everywhere. Don't worry, we can still use it, so no need to cry."

"Okay, wash your hands and we'll try again. Tap it on the side of the bowl, crack it open. Great! Wonderful! You're a fast learner. Ah, you seem so happy, it's making me smile. You're naturally good-looking, and you have a great smile to boot."

I looked closely to make sure no shell had fallen in. It seemed fine, so I transferred it to the large bowl with the sugar already in it. I then used a whisk to beat the eggs until they were smooth.

Next, I mixed in some baking powder before adding some wheat flour, then slowly, very slowly mixing it together. *"Ah, stop a moment. When you can see about half of the remaining flour, add some melted butter, then start stirring it slowly again."*

"It doesn't need to puff up with air like a meringue, so there's no need to make the eggs light and fluffy. And for some reason, if you stir it too fast, it's not as delicious, so it's best to do it carefully and slowly, but in such a way that the flour mixes in, but the mixture doesn't become too fixed."

"Yeah, like that. That's perfect. You're not the type to rush, so this is perfect for you."

"Now grease a cake mold with some butter, then place some finely crushed cookies down in place of a sheet of parchment paper, and pour the batter into the mold. Hit it on the counter a few times to get all the air out, then put the blueberries on top, enough to cover the dough entirely, then finish off with a sprinkling of sugar. Then pop it into the oven."

Lady Rachel made a face like she was surprised it was over already.

"It's super easy, right? It's all right, it'll still be delicious."

Even though it was full of butter, it would still take a while to bake, so I left watching over it to Lady Rachel and decided to continue with other household chores myself.

As I swept in front of the entrance, I started thinking about the cake we had just made... My way of making cakes was an old-fashioned country-style way of doing it. I use a lot of flour, butter, and sugar. That was because my mom had received an old recipe book from my aunt that I had used to learn how to bake. It even had "wheat flour" written in it instead of "cake flour"!

If you could get accustomed to the simple yet rustic taste, it

became a bit of a problem when you realized you could make a lot of things at home, because of all the calories. Even for the cookies I had baked in elementary school, I had used butter instead of baking powder, which had given them a flaky feel.

It took around the same amount of time to make, no matter how big the batch was, so every time I made cookies, I would triple the ingredients and fill up the oven, baking around six times as many cookies as our kitchen counters could handle. I'd store them in the cupboard, telling them that they would be my snacks for the week...as long as I could make myself exercise more. If I moved around, I would burn the calories. That would mean I could eat as much as I wanted.

Yes, I am quite the glutton.

When I was in middle school, I didn't have time for it, so I stopped baking for a while, but by the time I had moved into the apartment complex in high school, I was used to doing chores so I could start baking again. I used to make a lot of intricate pies with flaky pastry and tarts back then.

I had gotten really into sponge cakes and tried to find the best cheesecake recipe through trial and error. The old ladies who lived in the apartment building used to teach me traditional Japanese and Chinese sweet recipes. They would make them a lot; it was great. I had found all the kneading and cutting, and making the moon cakes especially, impossible to do on my own.

When I had moved out and into my own place, I didn't have an oven, so I'd drifted away from baking again. It would have been a pain to get all the equipment and ingredients I needed, and in the end it would only be me eating what I made anyway. The most I would do was make *adzuki*, red bean paste, white *dango*, or jelly in the summer.

Since coming to Miselle, I had been baking just as I remembered. Lady Adelaide's recipes were delicious and easy, and I loved them. We also had similar tastes in food, which was a great help.

After a while, the sweet smell of butter started to waft outside. I went back into the kitchen, and Lady Rachel was still there. She seemed restless and kept glancing at the oven... *Cute*. Lady Adelaide and Lord Walter had also gravitated to the kitchen. They seemed to be thinking the same thing as me as they watched Rachel and smiled. My heart felt warm watching the two of them exchange

glances and smile at each other like a mother and her son.

Ever since the day when Lord Walter had told me he had spoken to his mother, I had noticed that the atmosphere between them had become a lot more relaxed. It wasn't my place to get involved, but I couldn't help but feel gratified watching it.

Even now, they didn't talk a lot, but I didn't mind the silence, either. If anything, I was fond of it. As long as I didn't have to see Lady Adelaide looking solemnly at the picture on top of her hearth...that was enough for me.

"Wow, they're actual cakes! Marie-Louise, look! Look! I made these!"

As I took the perfectly cooked cakes out of the oven and lined them up on the wire drying rack, Lady Rachel got really excited. She even called over Roy, who was preparing the carriage, and gave him a small piece.

Steam rose from the inside of the cake as I cut into it with a fork.

"The blueberries are still quite hot, so be careful."

"...Wha shoo ah do, May-Louish?"

"My lady, while I understand it's delicious, please wait to speak until you've finished eating,"

"Lady Rachel, are your eyes teary because the cake is too hot?"

It seemed that the soft, moist cake, along with the tart—but not too bitter—blueberries had moved her emotionally.



"I'll come back! Please let me visit again," Lady Rachel had repeated multiple times before she had left to return to the Royal Capital.

"What an adorable young lady," Lady Adelaide remarked. "I never knew the marquis had such a daughter."

"She was still a child when you lived in the Royal Capital, so I guess you didn't know about her," Lord Walter responded.

"That's right," Lady Adelaide replied. "Well, I look forward to meeting her again."

We watched Lady Rachel's carriage until it turned the corner and disappeared from sight.

"Margaret," Lord Walter said, "I'll be returning to the capital

tomorrow. I have a few more items I need to record on the report, so I'd like to ask you some final questions."

"Tomorrow...I see," Lady Adelaide said sadly. "You'll already be leaving then."

"But I'll visit again," he replied. "This time, I couldn't stay as long as I'd like."

Lady Adelaide smiled. It filled me with joy seeing the two of them like this.

Lord Walter asked me where I'd like to go to talk, and I suggested the veranda, where there was a nice breeze. I headed to the kitchen to grab some tea and the magical writing device while Lord Walter retrieved the required documents from his room.

Lady Adelaide helped with the preparations in the kitchen. The carefully brewed tea was delicious no matter what variety it was. I wondered if I had ever given much thought to the people I'd poured tea for in my previous world.

"...I only ever used to pour tea for myself," Lady Adelaide mumbled quietly as she tipped the teapot and poured tea into three cups.

I stopped putting cookies on a plate as I looked up at her calm gaze. She was looking down at the cups of tea.

"I had more or less accepted that it would always be that way, but—Margaret, thank you," she said.

Her deep reddish-brown eyes were slightly watery as they looked at me. The corners of her mouth slowly rose, but then her lips quivered. My heart hurt.

"But I didn't...do anything. I'm unable to do anything. I honestly didn't—"

"It's not because you've done anything," she said. "It has nothing to do with that. But because you came here, you changed my life. There's no doubting that. Right?"

"I don't know. Even if I weren't here, something still may have led to your life changing. All I did was ask if I could stay here, because I adore you, and living with you is comfortable, so I didn't want to leave."

Lady Adelaide shook her head at me. "You don't have to accept it now, but let me say it. I'm wholeheartedly thankful for you."

She looked me in the eye and put her hand on my head. I gave a small nod as she softly stroked my cheek, then wrapped me up in her arms. I felt a lump in my throat at her warmth.

When she pulled back, I looked at her and felt myself get shy...
But as I watched her leave the kitchen, my vision was a little blurry.





“...WHAT happened?”

I had slapped my cheeks a few times, but it seemed I still had a sad look on my face. I laughed as if to say “nothing” and placed a cup of tea down in front of Lord Walter, who didn’t ask about it again after that.

I sat down in my usual chair on the veranda. Lord Walter handed over the reports he had written so far and asked that I look over them. I could see that he had tried his best to communicate my feelings clearly to the palace, and I could also tell that he took his job seriously based on what he had written.

Other than that, nothing really stood out. Lord Walter traced his fingers over the document after I returned it to him, and then his finger suddenly stopped.

“You said you wanted to support yourself,” he said. “Is there anything in particular you want to do regarding that?”

“That’s right. That’s the problem—even if people tell me it’s all right to just be a Spirit Caller and not do anything else... I feel like I’m not doing anything, but people are so thankful for me. It’s kinda stressful. And I’m worried that if I just lead a life where someone is looking after me, I’ll end up not being able to do anything for myself.”

But it was frustrating, because when I was finally asked what I could do to support myself, I didn’t have an answer.

“With my past work experience, I could work in a shop, but all the shops in Miselle are family owned and don’t need any additional staff. Plus, I can’t speak. As for babysitting or being a nanny, I’d probably have to leave here to go and live with some noble family to do that. I enjoy cooking, but I’m only good at home cooking. I can sew, but I’m not amazing at it or anything.”

Uh-oh, thinking about it, I’m not really good for anything, am I?

Lord Walter watched me scribble down my feelings on the magical writing device. He chose his words carefully before speaking again.

“The Royal Palace truly wants you to live as a Spirit Caller and receive aid from them,” he said. “They don’t expect you to get a job somewhere. Even if you were hoping to work and support yourself, that would create an opening for other countries to try and

interfere, thinking that this country can't even support its own Spirit Caller. They'll think that a great nation such as ours is unable to look after its most important figures. Plus, if you were to work in a specific shop or in someone's home, that might lead to people thinking that the Spirits favor them. Not everyone will be so nice about it, especially in the Royal Capital."

"Ah, that makes sense."

It wasn't that I hadn't thought about that possibility. There were bound to be people who, even though I had no special powers, would want to give some meaning to my existence and try to use me for their purposes. I was in a weird position, so I knew that it was best not to make myself stand out *too* much.

...However.

"That said, you don't seem like the type of woman to spend all your money on frivolous pleasures, and it feels like you're restless here at home unable to do anything," Lord Walter continued. "In that case, it's probably good that there's a lot that needs doing here at my mother's home, but—Margaret, by wanting to work somewhere else, does that mean you're hoping to strengthen your connection to this world?"

Ah, he saw right through me. I swear, my twenty-eight years of life experience has amounted to nothing.

Lord Walter laughed knowingly as my hand that was holding the magic pen stopped. "You really aren't good at hiding things. Even though you didn't say anything, it was written all over your face."

Huh? Alarmed, I tried to cover my face with both hands, but it was no use. I thought I had perfected my customer service smile. Lord Walter seemed to calm down as he watched me panic.

"It wasn't like that when you first came here, but it's gotten a lot more obvious lately," he clarified.

Aw, man...

"At first, it was only when you were with my mother and the others," he continued. "I thought you had started to let your guard down."

Gah, it's scary that I was doing that without realizing it. Do I really wear my heart on my sleeve like that?

I was unable to raise my head, but I could tell that Lord Walter was smiling. It wasn't a sneer or anything, but rather a kind, relaxed smile. I looked directly at him, and it was easy to read his

expression, although the muscles in his face hadn't actually moved all that much.

"This is why I work in the Royal Palace, after all," he said. "It's my job to read people's expressions, so don't worry about it too much. For now, though, I'd like to ask you to maintain the status quo until your wounds fully heal. I'll think about how you can start working in the meantime. I'd really prefer for you to stay here with my mother, but...it's also my job to ensure that your wishes align with those of the nation." He finished speaking with determination, and then he patted me on the head.

Although the size of his hand was entirely different, his head pats felt strangely similar to Lady Adelaide's. *I guess they are mother and son, after all.*

I felt like ever since coming to this world, my head had been pet more than in the rest of my life combined. Although I was bewildered by how they all treated me like a child, that wasn't to say I didn't like it. I could sense their care and kindness...their affection for me came through whenever they touched my head.

I wasn't strong enough to refuse their goodwill. Instead, I constantly worried about how I could return the favor.

What can I do by just being myself?

I took a deep breath and sat up straight. Even sitting, Lord Walter was quite tall, so I looked up at him and smiled. Lady Adelaide's son, Lord Walter. He was unemotional, stubborn, and quite unsociable. But he was such a trustworthy older brother. In the end, all I could write was, *"Thank you."*

Epilogue: Under Miselle's Sky

"SEE you again soon," Lord Walter called out from the window as his horse-drawn carriage started to move.

Lady Adelaide seemed only a little reluctant as she waved goodbye with a smile on her face. This time, she was sure he had meant what he'd said, and that they would see each other again soon.

I was also in the carriage. I was helping out at the clinic that day, and as I was about to set off for it, I had been told that Mark would be heading to the Royal Capital along with Lord Walter, so they could drop me off at the clinic when they picked up Mark.

Mark was usually very open about why he would be going to the Royal Capital, but this time he was being purposefully vague. He said he would tell me when he came back, but I assured him it was fine if it was too hard for him to talk about. It seemed to involve his biological family, so I figured it wasn't something I should touch on *too* much.

Although Lady Adelaide and Dr. Daniel had been teaching me about it, and I had even read books about it, I still knew barely anything about noble society. I would probably never get used to it.

Back in my grandparents' and great-grandparents' times, marriage and work were decided on by the family. However, I wasn't living in those times, and putting the complexities of the situation aside, I had been given the chance to make my own decisions. But no matter how I thought about it, that didn't seem like it would be enough for the aristocrats who were so used to everything being decided for them as a part of their everyday lives.

As a result, I couldn't say I understood Mark and Lady Adelaide's feelings exactly. I just wanted to be by their sides, like how Lady Adelaide had been by my side when I had cried on my first day after arriving here.

"I think he wants to surprise you, so just wait patiently," Dr. Daniel, who seemed aware of the details, said apologetically but with a bright smile on his face, protecting his beloved pupil.

It's nothing I should worry about, then. I said that I just wanted him to return home as usual, and that would be enough, and Dr. Daniel patted me on the head again.

I didn't have much in the way of belongings with me, just lunch for both me and the doctor. I didn't have the magical writing device, as I had returned it to Lord Walter with some feedback for improvement. I had asked for them to make it smaller so it would be easier to take with me, and suggested they make it easier to write on.

It was such a handy device. It was quicker than writing in someone's palm and it worked perfectly for communicating. Whenever I went shopping, I could ask a lot of questions without making the other customers wait. It wasn't only convenient to use; it also had a beautiful ivy pattern, and the pen was a feather quill, so it was very satisfying to hold and use.

It's always great when you have cute stationery or everyday items.

It reminded me of my middle school days, when I would look for pencils decorated with cute patterns I liked. I was amazed that magic allowed me to use something like this writing device, and I wrote a letter of thanks and asked them to pass on how grateful I was.

"It's difficult to manufacture these kinds of products," Lord Walter said. "But since we had someone who actually needed it, it was a great opportunity for us to test it and receive feedback."

It seemed they usually leaned more toward creating items that a lot of people would need, and even if it was something that was desperately needed by very few people, it was difficult for them to get around to making it. I guessed that was similar to how things were in my old world.

"They were so excited that they could do a lot of research, thanks to the Spirit Caller."

When I heard that from Lord Walter, I felt like there was some reason for me having lost my voice. I was somewhat pleased.

When we arrived at the clinic, Mark was waiting for me outside. He took my hand as I climbed down from the carriage. In the meantime, Lord Walter got out to say goodbye to the doctor before returning, continuing his conversation with the doctor through the little window on the other side of the carriage.

As the driver loaded the luggage, I said goodbye to Mark near the carriage.

“What would you like as a souvenir?” he asked.

Huh, that puts me on the spot. I thought about it for a moment, then responded: “*Fun stories about your trip.*” He looked at me blankly at first, then he suddenly smiled and started patting me on the head.

Hey, you’re messing my hair up!

Thankfully, I already had everything I needed, and I didn’t know what they had in the Royal Capital anyway, so nothing immediately came to mind. *Well, I guess they probably have everything. It is a city. The Royal Capital, in fact.*

But if anything, information would be best. Plus, Mark didn’t seem to be very fond of the Royal Capital, so if I told him to bring back some interesting stories, maybe he would be able to enjoy himself a little. And hearing fun stories would be fun for me, too. *Hold on, why am I going on like a lovesick teenager? Where did this come from? Is it Lady Rachel’s influence?*

“All right,” Mark said. “Well then, I’ll be off.”

As I panicked internally, Mark fixed my hair, which he himself had messed up, while giving me instructions on what to do while he was away: “Don’t run. Don’t jump up and down. Don’t go out by yourself. Go home before it gets dark,” he instructed with a serious expression. He was going on like an overprotective parent.

“Okay, okay,” I responded as I half-listened. Then he hit me with a surprise attack—he hugged me.

“...I’ll be right back, okay?” he whispered into my ear. Then, when he pulled back, he dropped a kiss on top of my head. The doctor and Lord Walter wouldn’t have been able to see it because we were hidden by the carriage door...or at least they shouldn’t have.

I sure hope they didn’t.

The carriage set off with a light clattering sound. Dr. Daniel probably noticed my bright red cheeks, but he pretended not to, and when I looked up, my heart was calmed by his kind gaze.

“Mark and Walter are both doing this for their futures. So you don’t need to worry,” he said.

He had explicitly stated that they weren’t doing this just for the Spirit Caller, but I had always been on the receiving end of their care so far. What would I be able to do for them?

“Well then, what do we have today? I always look forward to my lunch break when you’re at the clinic,” Dr. Daniel said, carefully

accepting the basket with our lunch in it.

On the days when I went to the clinic, Lady Adelaide always prepared our favorite foods. She was that kind.

The doctor said he was excited to open it, then put a finger against his lips and headed into the clinic. As I followed him, I paused, turning around one more time and looking at what lay before me.

It was a landscape of curved roads made from red bricks and cobblestone, with stone houses along each side. I could see all of the honey-colored walls and roofs, and the peaceful green scenery nearby. Beyond the greenery was Lady Adelaide's mansion.

The place I would be returning to.

When I closed my eyes, I thought of my previous world. When I opened my eyes, it remained in my heart as simply memories. But it didn't make me feel lonely or sad... Instead, those memories were like a deep warmth—the kind you get from warm milk on a cold day. Precious memories.

I was sure I was able to think of it that way thanks to the kind people I had met here and how happy I was now.

The wind blew and brought me back to my senses. I looked at a flowerbed near the entrance to the clinic, and I could see there was something small and golden hidden away there. The doctor had already gone inside, so I knelt down and reached my hand out to greet the fairies.

They nervously looked around to make sure that there was no one else nearby before gingerly coming out of the flowerbed. Then they began to fly around me like they were dancing, tugging on my hair, sitting on my shoulders, and giving me small kisses on the cheek. *Ah, they're so adorable.*

"Ah, Miss!"

The sudden voice from afar caused the fairies to panic and fly away. I gave them a small wave, then stood up and adjusted my skirt. The children ran toward me, carrying toys similar to the beanbags I had made for the clinic. It seemed that they had shown them to the women in the women's meeting, and they'd made more for them.

"Miss, look! Now I can juggle with two of them!" shouted one of the children.

"Me too!" another yelled.

I patted them on the head as they urged me to show them how

to juggle with three beanbags.

“Ah, Margaret,” the doctor said. “Old Man Tom asked me to give you this. As thanks for before.” He handed me a ripe peach. *Wow, it looks delicious.*

He had looked bored in the waiting room, so I had been talking with him, but I didn’t think it was anything that deserved thanks. But the doctor said to just accept it, so I happily did so.

I felt something tugging at my skirt, and when I looked down, I was met with a huge smile.

“I’ve been waiting so nice,” the small child said. “So, will you play with me?” As I felt her warm fingers, I was reminded of when Mark had had his arms around me.

“You can always make a place into somewhere you belong. If you need a reason, you can find one,” he had said.

I remembered those words. He was really always so—

I looked up at the blue Miselle sky and took a deep breath. *Keep looking forward.* In both heart and mind.

I had no idea what awaited me next. But that would be true no matter where I was. And in that case, this was where I wanted to belong.

As I headed into the clinic with the children, I noticed one little gold light remaining in the flower bed.

Thank you for looking after me.

I laughed silently as the fairy flew off into the sky.

Afterword

NICE to meet you all. Or for some, hello again. I'm Kosuzu Kobato.

Thank you so much for picking up *Making Jam in the Woods*.

One day, I came up with the idea of making jam in a kitchen surrounded by nature. That led to this story coming to life from spring to summer in the year 2016, and then being posted on a webnovel website.

The protagonist is a woman in her late twenties who is transported to a different world after an accident. However, she has no magical abilities in a world where magic is the norm. The story follows this ordinary woman, who has very basic knowledge and no particular talents, as she seeks to lead a normal life and live happily.

No major events or conspiracies take place, nor does she live a glamorous life. I wanted to write a calm and heartwarming story, after all.

In the realm of online webnovels, this one would probably be considered quite plain, so I never thought it would be picked up by a publisher for an official release in print. I'm incredibly thankful.

When it was decided that it would be published, some changes were made to the layout, and I added some scenes to make it easier to read. There haven't been many changes to the story, but I hope those who read it online will be able to enjoy it once more in print.

I hope you are able to enjoy the slow, rural life in another world alongside Margaret—the slightly old-fashioned lifestyle, the handmade foods, the conversations and relationships with the other characters, and of course, the love.

I would like to use this opportunity to give my thanks to those who helped me in the process of writing this book.

The illustrator, Yuichi Murakami, breathed life into Margaret, who was simply an idea in text before. Every time I look at the wonderful illustrations, I get so excited. I really apologize for asking you to make her wear an apron on top of her beautiful dress, but she looks even cuter in the apron!

To my editor, Y. You found my story in a sea of webnovels and were the driving force behind it becoming a book. I was able to navigate the world of publication with ease and confidence thanks to your warm and precise advice. Our calming meetings helped me so much.

I also owe a lot to the editing department. From proofreading, to binding, to printing, to the managerial side, as well as the bookstores... I realized how much work goes into one book. A lot of people are behind every step.

To everyone who supported my webnovel, I learned about the difficulties of writing, and the irreplaceable joy that comes with it.

To my family, who were always by my side, supporting me and being my shoulder to lean on.

And lastly, my heartfelt thanks to you, who is reading this right now.

I hope this book brings you at least a small amount of warmth.

Kosuzu Kobato
2018



The Inconvenient Life of an Arousing Priestess

by Makino Maebaru (Story) Hachi Uehara (Art)

What adventures await a priestess with the inconvenient power to rouse the baser instincts of others and the imperial prince who's unaffected by her?!



I Guess This Dragon Who Lost Her Egg to Disaster Is My Mom Now

by Suzume Kirisaki (Story) Cosmic (Art)

A gender bender fantasy series about a betrayed adventurer who ends up not only turning into a girl, but being raised by a powerful dragon too!



Revolutionary Reprise of the Blue Rose Princess

by Roku Kaname (Story) Hazuki Futaba (Art)

She was a queen who died during a revolution. Now she's gone back in time. Her first course of action? Changing her fate by winning over the revolutionary mastermind!



https://crossinfworld.com/
Twitter @CrossInfWorld



Cross Infinite World